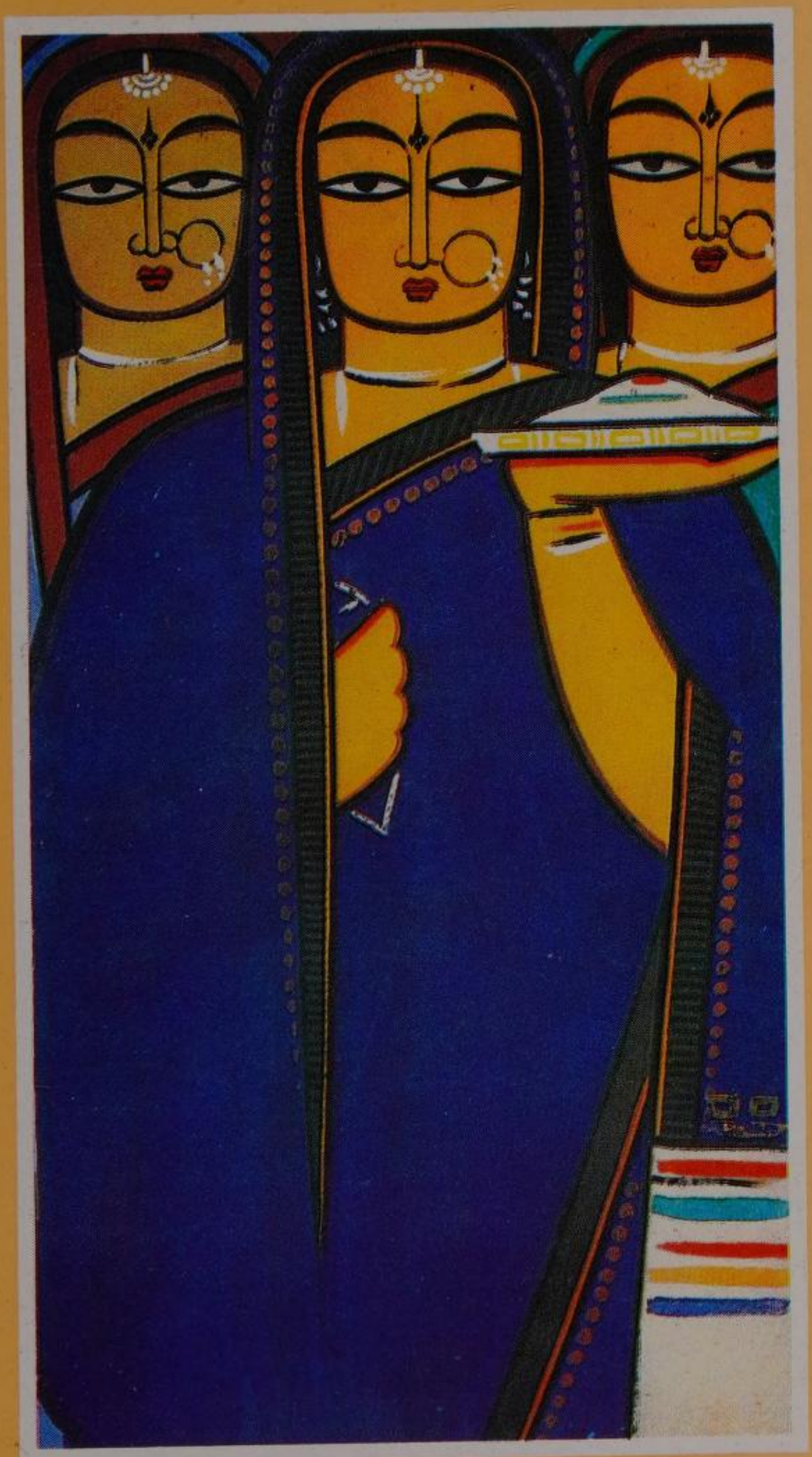
The Bengalees

Glimpses of History and Culture



SAMAREN ROY

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Samaren Roy

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Dedication

To the memory of Asutosh Mookherjee, a mathematical genius, who single-handedly gave Bengalis a comprehensive educational system, which no other State in India was able to build, against all odds and the opposition of an alien Government.

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PREFACE

CALCUTTA, the spiritual and intellectual home of the Bengalis, was the only distinctive centre of the civilisation that sprang up in the vast area in Africa and Asia which opened to European trade and domination after Vasco da Gama's rounding the Cape in 1497. An extensive littoral received ideas and remained under European influence for over four hundred years, but none of the other port cities between, and inclusive of, Cape Town in the West and Macao and Manila in the east, turned into sources of moral movements, major literary centres, and homes of schools of painting, music or science.

Before Calcutta could produce literary works, paintings, songs and outstanding works in science, it was disturbed by moral issues. The three villages which had been coalesced to form the city upstream on the Hooghly were urban settlements going back to the eleventh and sixteenth centuries in which lived scholastics belonging to different traditions. Among the scholastics was a sprinkling of thinkers. The thinkers belonged to two bread traditions of monism, both Vedantist and Sufi, and those subscribing to the systems of Plato and Aristotle, and to Neo-Platonism. Since the last persecution for propagating new ideas occured in the middle of the seventeenth century, and in distant Delhi, the atmosphere was mild and tolerant, with sporadic squabbles in debate.

Even those debates respected denominational boundaries. Those who swore by Plato or Aristotle had to be secretive about it, for since the eleventh century, that is before Sultanates in Delhi or in Bengal were founded, philosophy had been pronounced as antithetical to Islam, an attitude referred to by Abu Taleb, the first Calcuttan to travel to Europe at the end of the eighteenth century.

Mathematics and medicine could be practised openly, but philosophy only as a private hobby.

Medicine was the profession of a particular caste of Hindus in Bengal as was astrology of another. Hindu society had the family, and not the individual, as its unit. Through a system of exogamy combined with endogamy the family was related to other families in the caste. Till 1933 the term Hindu was applicable to the "clean", and more specifically to four castes in Bengal, the Brahmins, Vaidyas, Kayasthas and Baniks; the rest were "sudras".

Since 1545, or may be even earlier, the upper castes among the Hindus were learning Persian, because it was the language of administration, and also Arabic, for the two were taught together. Armenians knew and used Persian, as did the Muslims. Persian was the speech of communication for all those engaged in public activities, Muslim, Hindu and Christians, between Europeans and Asians.

Society was exclusively male, and when female company was needed the nautch girls provided it. Men drank, but as scretively as they read philosophical tracts, or turned to it in contemplation. Drinking was a privilege of the rich, as was having concubines. The less affluent took *bhang* or smoked *ganja,* for neither announced its consumption through smell as liquor did. The Sufi murshid to a pir, as well as the Vaishnava bhakta, could compose, sing or listen to songs, erotic in feeling and verbiage, but addressed to the Divine.

Rajnaraian Basu (1826 - 1899), maternal grandfather of Aurobindo Ghosh, educated at Hindoo College, wrote in his autobigraphy that the generation previous to his was not addicated to drinks as his was.

Its vice was whore hounding. His own generation found drinks and beef entertaining enough. In 1844 his father sprung a surprise on him by giving him two glasses of sherry and a meal of Muslim cooked *polao, kalia and kofta.*

Pedigreed Brahmins (Kulins) could have a multiplicity of wives, in one authentic case 107, not in succession, for few could be as long lived, but at the same time. Like the proverbial sailor having a woman in each port, the Kulin Brahmin could have a wife in each village on the route of his perambulations. He didn't have to support any of them, for Brahmins, males, had to be supported. At each wife's place the Brahmin received cash and gifts for a night's stay as though she were a client. In such a situation a slash-and-burn feminism would have been the order of the day but no woman leader appeared, and has not appeared till today. Some men took upon themselves the task , but none made it his life's work, except Iswarchandra Bandopadhyaya, better known as Vidyasagar (1820 - 1891). Developments in the nineteenth century were not viewed as a feminist struggle, or even as a process of female emancipation, but as social reform. In actual practice the debates were conducted in the then prevalent religious idiom.

In reality the controversies were facets of the struggle of modernity against tradition, of human feelings against the cruel demands of custom, and of philosophy against religion. Of course, Hinduism did not recognise any conflict between philosophy and religion. During the nineteenth century the struggle was waged by successive groups such as the Derozians and the three schools of Brahmos, and individuals such as Rammohun Roy, Akshaykumar Dutta and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. The earliest instance of tradition, as expressed in custom being challenged, has not received the attention it deserves. It occurred as early as 1756 when the British administration was not yet established and the only missionary about was the settlement chaplain enjoined not to concern himself with the natives. Raja Rajballav Sen (1698 - 1763), in seeking remarriage for his widowed child, was moved purely by filial feelings. But though he could keep the daughter away from the funeral pyre, remarriage involved another person and was a social affair. So he sought scriptural sanction , for a whispered tradition was current that remarriage

was permissible under certain conditions... There is no mention of the Parasara hymn in accounts of the affair then, though it was to become the mainstay of legislation a century later.

Rajballav Sen did find some priests who opined that widow remarriage was permissible. That was the start of the fundamentalist resort to earlier scriptures against customary accretions which were later to become a liberating force. In its first encounter with custom it failed, for Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray organised a counter-conference of pundits who were loud and powerful enough in decrying widow remarriage.

Krishnachandra Ray (1710 - 1782) was an important support for the Orientalist bias of the administration, which lasted till 1826. Warren Hastings's establishment of the Calcutta Madrassah and William Jones's Asiatic Society, and of the Sanskrit College at Benares, were the result of this bias. The Fort William College also displayed an excessive (from the point of view of modernisation) interest in matters Oriental. These institutions served the administration and Europe's Oriental Renaissance, but in due time petered out. The last achievements by the Asiatic Society were Prinsep's decipherment of the Brahmi script in 1837 and Cunningham's identification and inventory of Buddhist sites completed by 1855.

Both the Madrassah and the Sanskrit College in Calcutta (established later in 1824) were equipped with English classes to enable them to be instruments of modernisaion. That was the hope of the Orientalists who had dominated the administration till 1820. But by 1855 it was clear that Maulvis and Pundits at those institutions had remained as disdainful of modern education as they had been at the start; the Maulvis all the more, because names such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Euclid occurred in their texts too. And those texts were compiled earlier than the texts in English, and antiquity is more respectable than modernity. That was the basis on which tradition was built.

The Orientalists then turned to the vernaculars. The most advanced among them, Urdu and Bengali, lacked texts, and were

poorer in regard to the sciences and philosophy than both Arabic and Sanskrit.

Meanwhile, Abu Taleb brought back from Europe the idea of progress though he lamented the fact that Europe, especially England, which ruled a religious country like India, should give precedence to philosophy over religion. Abu Taleb's account of his travel to Europe does not seem to have influenced anybody, not even his anxiety about philosophy, eclipsing religion, because teaching of European philosophy, as it had developed after Locke, had begun in only about a dozen schools in Calcutta. These schools were meant for English boys resident in the city, but they admitted some Indian boys too. Two Tagores, Prasanna and Dwarkanath, had attended Sherbourne's and come out as rich young men active in public life by the time Rammohun Roy came from a small town in 1814 to live in the city.

Locke had particular relevance to the Indian situation, because he rated reason based on sensory perception as more dependable than intuition, whereas in Indian thought intuition has overall supremacy and there is emphasis on the limits to sensory perception. Even in the twentieth century Aurobindo Ghosh held that at a certain stage reason blocked the way to knowledge : "Reason was the helper, reason is the bar." Mahatma Gandhi at critical times listened to his "inner voice".

Rammohun Roy had published in 1804 a tract, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* (Gift to Monotheists) which struck at the root of the ascriptive society of India by asserting that each person on growing up should review the religious ideas he had been brought up on and not blindly accept them. It is possible that the tract was addressed to fellow cosmopolitan literati. And on settling down in Calcutta, Rammohun founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1815 where men belonging to different denominations could meet to exchange ideas. It was the first voluntary association in the city. As the name signifies, the Atmiya Sabha emphasised the role of an individual's conscience over his belonging to a

denomination. Dwarkanath Tagore and Prasanna Tagore joined the association; there were some European members too.

Orthodox opposition to Rammohun Roy was so strong that he had to operate from behind the scenes in the matter of the foundation of the Hindoo College, though by 1823 he was openly advocating English education replacing the Oriental, Persian or Sanskrit.

He had taught himself English when he was past 30 years of age. Born a Brahmin, he had learnt Sanskrit at home, then had schooling at Patna in Persian and Arabic and then gone to Benares to become a pundit. He was among the few who could judge the respective merits of the three systems, especially the vast scope for self-education that knowledge of English opened up.

Although self-effacing at the time that the idea of Hindoo College was being mooted, six years later he publicly joined the issue when proposals were being made for a Sanskrit College at Calcutta, by advocating diversion of scarce funds to English education, and expressing his opposition to the proposal.

Nobody had expected that the Hindoo College would play the seminal role it did. That was solely due to the appointment on its teaching staff of Henry Derozio as a teacher of English. The appointment was in 1826 and ended five years later, but its influence continued till late in the century.

In the meantime Rammohun Roy in 1828 founded the Brahmo Sabha, which indicates that his emphasis had shifted from conscience to monotheism. Rammohun might have turned his Brahmo Sabha from a local organisation into part of a world-wide movement. The finding by William Jones that Sanskrit belonged to the same family of languages as Greek, Latin and English, had increased the self-confidence of Indians. Monotheism, eschewing idolatry, and membership of the Unitarian Church, could have been expected to bolster it further.

We have no writing of Rammohun to back up the supposition. The tracts he published before he left for England were concerned with immediate issues like the abolition of suttee and on the Upanishads, which show his continuing effort to bring about a liberal society through recalling the fundamental texts. For once, fundamentalism had become liberal.

One significant matter about proscription of the practice of *suttee* is the use of the word abolition. The abolition was in fact a social reform carried out by legislation, quite in keeping with the aims of the Utilitarians. When Rammohun reached Britain, the aged Jeremy Bentham himself came out to greet him.

In England Rammohun made friends with Robert Owen, the founder of the co-operative movement, and attracted considerable interest because of his intellect, Rammohun died in England and so the question of *prayaschitta* (penance) for undertaking a sea voyage was left unresolved in the case of the first Calcuttan who broke the taboo.

Dwarkanath Tagore, who was the second man to break it by undertaking two voyages, did not undergo the purificatory rites after the first, although he was externed from the inner part of the family dwelling by the female inmates, and he did not return home after the second. It seems also that by 1846 the requirement had gone into disuse in the city, but Surendranath Banerjee was subjected to a boycott in his village. The subject of purificatory rites continued to arouse interest as late as 1894 when the Standing Committee on the Sea Voyage Question was appointed by the Indian Legislative Council.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Hindu culture and civilisation became subjects of deep interest for Europeans during the latter part of the 18th century, no effort was made to explore the history and culture of the regional peoples of India. It was perhaps not realised at the time that the regional people had any history and culture different from the mainstream of the vedic Aryan civilisation. The discovery of Bengal's history and culture was thus left to a few Bengalis whose researches, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century, have now shed new light. It has now been revealed that the traditions and culture of the native population of Bengal have had peculiarities and a distinctiveness of their own different from that of the Aryan Hindus.

This discovery inspired the famous Bengali scholar, late Haraprasad Sastri, one of the pioneers in the field of historical research in Bengal, to make the statement that "Bengalees are a self-oblivious people." This very description explains why a history of the racio-cultural group of people, residing in the eastern region of India, has become necessary. It is necessary not only for the people of Bengal to know their own culture and traditions, but also to let others know the distinctiveness of the history and culture of the Bengalis, whose unorthodoxy has distinguished them from the rest of India.

Haraprasad Sastri firmly held that Bengal had a distinctiveness which clearly indicated that before its submergence under Brahmanical domination, it was the seat of a civilisation

different in significant respects from that of the vedic Aryan, the latter being pastoral while the former was agricultural. He further said that Buddhism and Jainism had their origin east of the orthodox centre of Brahmanical culture, in the middle Gangetic plain, and in both, the authority of the Rig Vedic tradition was absent. In these two religious systems there is a moral approach to the problems of life by their emphasis on the primacy of the human spirit in contrast to vedic theology. This humanistic approach, the eminent anthropologist N.K. Bose writes, "gave rise in later times in Bengal to a number of unorthodox sects, in which the human body itself is treated as the mystic temple of God...It had its origin in the treatment of humanity as the highest value, in contrast to vedic ritualdom" (*Modern Bengal,* Calcutta, 1959, p. 9). The famous Vaishnava poet, Chandidas, wrote "Man is the ultimate Truth" which found great popular response among Bengalis. The eminent historian, R.C. Majumdar refers to many elements in the culture and civilisation of *Gauda* and *Vanga* "which differentiated them from the rest of India, and imparted a distinct individuality to the Bengalis" (*History of Ancient Bengal,* Calcutta, 1971, p. 468).

Anthropologists generally agree that the Bengalis "originally came of an ethnic stock that was different from the stock from which the vedic Aryans originated" (*ibid* p. 19). It has now been established by eminent anthropologists and scholars (like Sarat Chandra Roy, Dr. B.S. Guha, Rama Prasad Chanda and others) that Bengalis were proto-Australoid people, distinct from the Nordic Aryans, and only later, mixed with the Dravidians and even much later with the vedic Aryans. The Bengali society was casteless unlike what we find in North India (vide Atul Sur, *Bangaleer Nritatwik Parichaya* - The Anthropological Characteristics of the Bengalis - Calcutta, 1977, p. 50). Later during the rule of Ballal Sen (1160-1176) the first attempt to introduce the caste system was made. In *Rev Lalbehari De and the Tale of Chandramukhi* (in Bengali) Dr. Debipada Bhattacharya, a former Vice-Chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University, writes :

"Lalbehari De was born in a poor subarna-vanik family in an obscure village in Burdwan. This *subarna-vanik* community was declared as an out-caste, a caste from which an upper caste Hindu could not accept drinking water, from the time of Ballal Sen" (p.13). This was even more vigorously pursued by the later *Sena* rulers. But whenever Bengalis found an opportunity, they revolted against such rigid socio-religious hierarchical systems either through conversion to Islam or Chaitanya's Vaishnavism, or, as is evident from an earlier period, through acceptance of Buddhism. Dr. Bhattacharya contends that Chaitanya welcomed the subarna-vanik community into his Vaishnava religion and thereby struck at the obstinacy of Hindu orthodoxy. That is why the subarna-vanik community of Bengal had imbibed so much of Chaitanya's Vaishnavism.

As late as between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., heterodoxy flourished strongly in this part of India. The vedic Brahmanical religion was imposed later in this region by ruling dynasties but the general mass of people were little affected by this, nor did they fully accept the vedic social or religious systems. Local, chthonic deities continued to be worshipped at sacred groves or *chaityas (*mounds) even after the vedic religion came to dominate. "The social structure" of this region "was different, administration and forms of government were also different; an opulent merchant class lived in comparative economic security, while the free peasants and artisans, constituting the bulk of the population, enjoyed quite a high standard of living", writes Sukumari Bhattacharji in her monumental study, *The Indian Theogony,* published in 1978. Later though, through the imposition of the vedic Brahmanic hierarchical system, new modes of social and religious life were absorbed slowly in this region but that did not happen without considerably altering the character of the vedic religion itself (*ibid* p.15).

The cultural-historical roots of the Bengalis are pre-vedic as well as non-vedic. Bengalis pursued Tantricism, a distinct socio-religious tradition originating from the Atharva Veda. The

first mantras of both the *Paippalada* and the *Saunaka* schools of Atharva Veda emphasising on the human body are the basic principles of Tantric philosophy. Later, when Buddhism spread to the East, its emphasis on classless and casteless society appealed to the Bengalis and they embraced Buddhism in large numbers, but in turn transformed it into a kind of *Tantric* Buddhism.

At one time Jainism did have considerable influence in Bengal. Hiuen Tsang's and Fa Hien's memoirs bear testimony to that. But impact of Buddhism was evidently greater. In Bengal Buddhism had spread even before the time of Asoka and was strengthened during the four hundred years of *Pala* rule. Many Bengali scholars, like Shilabhadra and Atisa Dipankar had taught at the Buddhist centres of learning at Nalanda and Vikramshila. Many Buddhist scholars from Bengal had also travelled to Tibet and earned fame and respect.

A significant aspect of Tantric culture that pervaded Bengal is the role and importance ascribed to women in society. Thus while mother goddesses dominate in Bengal and in Tantra, they "occupy a very subordinate position in vedic belief and worship. They hardly play any part as rulers of the world" (Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology,* p. 124). On the contrary, vedic society was patriarchal and the worship of the male gods predominates in the vedas. Hence we find that whereas the major pujas in Bengal are of the mother goddesses, it is significantly absent in North India. There, Ganesa, Rama and even Hanumana are the predominant gods and the biggest celebration is the *Ramlila* in observance of the mythological killing of Ravana by Rama.

In later *Brahmanas,* we see the first signs of the mother goddesses assuming some importance. It is believed that images of mother goddesses and their worship had infiltrated into Aryan homes through their non-Aryan wives. Exogamy introduced non-Aryan wives into Aryan society, who had brought their own gods together with their own modes of worship into their

husbands' homes. The vedic gods also changed their character through the impact of the non-vedic population who had lived side by side. The result of this ethnic and cultural interaction is first noticed in the tenth mandala of the Rig Veda when apparently the vedic Aryans reached the Gangetic Valley (*vide* Dr. Jogiraj Basu, *Veder Parichaya,* in Bengali, "Introduction to the Vedas", Calcutta, 1975, p. 31). The process reached its culmination in the *Brahmanas.*

Goddesses have minor roles and position in the vedas, hence vedic gods are found to be generally polygamous while the non-vedic Siva is monogamous. Besides, whereas the woman appeared primarily in the role of lover in Vaishnavism, she is featured pre-eminently as Mother in Saivism. The mother aspect of Devi (Mother Goddess) can probably be traced back to proto-historic times. The worship of the divine mothers was very intimately associated with the Tantric forms of Sakti worship. Saktism probably began as an off-shoot of Saivism but later developed as a separate cult and became the focal point for all mother goddess epiphanies. Assimilation with Tantra changed its orientation and led to the growth of the Sakti cult. Dr. R.C. Majumdar refers "to the evolution of proto-Bengali dialect and alphabet, the special preference for the goddesses representing female energy culminating in the worship of Durga as national festival, the growth of Tantrism.... the use of fish and meat as articles of food, and lastly, the peculiar laws of inheritance codified by Jimutavahana which differed in essential respects from those in force in other parts of India." (*History of Ancient Bengal,*Calcutta,1971, p. 468).

We find that worship of Chandi, another mother goddess, was predominant in Bengal from very early times. One section of the *Markandeya Purana,* known as the *Devi-Mahatmya* (also called Durgasaptasati and/or Chandi) is ceremoniously recited every day during the autumnal worship of the Goddess Durga in Bengal.

Mythologically, the most important aspect of Durga is that of *Mahisasurmardini,* which forms the main topic of *Devi-Mahatmya.* By slaying the demon, Devi Chandi restored the gods' dominions to them. In other words, most of the vedic nature gods were reinstated under her dominion and she connected vedic polytheism with Sakta monotheism, as R.P. Chanda has suggested in his *Indo-Aryan Races.* Thus she also embodies the highest philosophical principles in her personality. She is omnipotent, a creator of heaven and earth and of the gods as well; she is the primal energy (*adyasakti).*

The process of Durga's growth in stature was long and steady. One by one she absorbed the main traits of all regional mother goddesses, and all of them fused into one supreme goddess, Durga. Each of the component deities brought with her a special trait, special cult practices and a different mythological and religious significance. She is the daughter of a vedic king, hence vedic functions have to be observed through Yajna (fire worship). The Puranas took care to emphasise a continuous mythological tradition including the non-Aryan tradition of *puja;* as well as the tradition of Tantra. Sukumari Bhattacharji writes : "One reason of the Aryan's partial religious surrender is the pre-Aryan worship of images....*Puja* (worship of idols) is much more colourful than Yajna....has a greater and more direct appeal to man's aesthetic sense" (*The Indian Theogony, p.10).*

Durga is also *Sakambhari,* hence all kinds of vegetables and fruits have to be offered. An aspect of the Devi is the concept that she is the personification of the vegetation spirit, which is emphasised in her name *Sakambhari.* This also finds corroboration in the present day *Navapatrika-pravesa* ceremony during the Durga puja. Hence, Rama Prasad Chanda observed : "This worship of Durga is but a survival of the agrarian phase."

Durga is not only the Mother, she is also the daughter of the household in Bengali society. So during the pujas the daughters traditionally visit their parents' home like Durga visiting her parents annually. On the day of immersion, she is

given a farewell by the women in the family before her departure to her husband's home which forms part of the ritual of Durga puja. Over the years, particularly since the nineteenth century resurgence of cultural activity and affluence in Bengal, the Durga puja has come to be the most important festival and social occasion of the Bengalis.

* * *

Throughout her history Bengal had faced a series of invasions, physical and cultural. Exploitation by constantly changing monarchies had disturbed Bengal's social and economic life through the centuries. But Bengalis have always tried to adapt to new ideas. Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, primarily because of the advent of the new conquerors from the West and consequent impact of new ideas and opening of new economic opportunities, a new class of people came into social prominence and assumed community leadership. A tremendous upsurge of social, economic and intellectual activity, hitherto unforeseen in India, developed in Bengal, and thus the nineteenth century came to be widely recognised as the "Bengal renaissance".

In order to effectively match the new ideas and their protagonists, the Bengali orthodoxy also rose to the occasion and contributed in large measure towards this new creative cultural activity. The conflict between the protagonists of new liberal thoughts and values and the orthodoxy characterises the nineteenth century intellectual life of Bengal. This cultural resurgence is the dominant factor responsible for Bengal's progress and her elevation to the position of leadership in Indian life and society, which Bengal had maintained through the first half of the present century. In the process, Bengalis became a little too proud of their cultural and intellectual achievements.

CHAPTER II

THE ROOTS OF BENGALI CULTURE

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a few Europeans began a historical and cultural enquiry into Aryan civilisation. But no similar efforts were made towards exploring the civilisations of the different regional peoples of pre-Aryan India. Perhaps it was assumed they had no cultural traditions of their own different from the vedic Aryan. It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that a few Bengalis enquired specifically into the culture and history of Bengal. Consequent research has indicated that the cultural tradition of the native population of Bengal, or more generally of the people of Eastern India, is distinct in many features from that of the dominant vedic Aryan civilisation of Northern India.

According to late Haraprasad Sastri, one of the pioneers of research into the early history of Bengal, the beginnings of Bengali history are so uncertain, that for all anybody can tell, it may be quite as old as Egypt, Babylon and China : "When the Aryans had reached the Punjab, Bengal had already attained a high level of civilisation, and when they had advanced upto Allahabad, they began to abuse Bengalees as speechless and devoid of religious sense presumably, being jealous of their distinctive culture. Before the birth of Buddha, Bengalees had become so powerful on land and sea that a disinherited son of Bengal conquered Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with seven hundred men, and gave the island its name Simhal."

Excavations at *Pandurajar Dhibi* and *Mahisadal,* both in *Ajay Valley* in the Burdwan district of West Bengal, have since established the existence of Copper age culture in this part of the country. The absolute date of this culture, established by Carbon-14 tests, is about 1300 B.C., almost the same that is assigned to the Aryan incursions into north-west India. This Copper Age culture of the Ajay Valley, if not of entire Bengal, was largely contemporary with, and independent of, the vedic culture.

According to Dr. R.C. Majumdar this civilisation is much older than the composition of *Bodhayan Dharmasutra,* which mentions the place, *Aryavarta,* for the first time *(2/2/30).*

Also, according to the Buddhist text, *Arya Manjusri Mula Kalpa,* the people of Bengal belong to the *Asura* community and the *Asura* language was the language of the Bengalis. In vedic and post-vedic literature, the *Asuras* are known to be anti-gods, that is, they were opposed to the vedic gods. The word *Asura* is mentioned in the oldest sections of the Vedas, and vedic literature indicate they were highly civilized. *Asuras* were well versed in magic, which indicate that they belonged to the tradition of Atharva Veda. Their proficiency in Architecture is also mentioned. It was an *Asura,* Maydanab, whose fame as an architect had become legendary.

Anthropological and archaeological researches about the cultural tradition of Bengal have since revealed significant facts about the distinctive social and religious forms of the region which kept it outside the domination of the vedic Aryans. It is known that the ancient Hindu theologians always kept Bengal outside the pale of the Brahmanic hierarchy, and even in later times, the Brahmins of Bengal were looked down upon by their northern Indian counterparts. The distinctive social tradition which permeated the Bengali society needs therefore to be studied properly and intensively, not only in order to find the ethnological, anthropological and linguistic roots of Bengali culture, but also to construct a meaningful history of the Bengali tradition.

Vedic Period

That the culture and civilisation of Eastern India rose to a high peak even before the vedic peoples had advanced eastwards has now been established by many historical evidences and archaeological findings. It is now held that the ancient aboriginal people, who had established themselves from the Mediterranean to the Bay of Bengal before the spread of what is known as Aryan civilisation, were probably the *dasyus* mentioned in the Rig Veda and described as *chirping birds* in the *Aiteriya Aranyaka.* The word, *anasa,* which was formerly derivated so as to mean noseless, has now been derivated to mean those people whose speech is bad or impossible to understand. The archaeological findings in Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and other cities of the Indus Valley civilisation are now known to be relics of these *dasyus* of pre-Vedic times. It is now common knowledge that the Dravidian language and the spoken language of the Indus Valley people were unknown to the Rig-Vedic peoples; and also that the vedic language was far more developed than the Dravidian language. The vedic people were also known to be very keen on correct pronunciation and because they could not understand what they called 'ill-pronounced speech' of the Dravidians, they called them *anasa* or foulmouthed 'chirping birds' and the like. These Dravidian people were the original inhabitants of Bengal and Bihar. Rig Veda (5/29/10) refers to *anasa* as language of the *dasyus* of *Kikata* region. According to H.H. Wilson, *Kikata* is usually identified with South Bihar. Yaska, the famous author of *Nirukta,* describes *Kikata* as land inhabited by non-Aryans (Nirukta, 6/32). Modern Bengali is a mixture of the Dravidian and Aryan language groups.

According to modern anthropologists, however, the word 'Dravidian' does not mean an ethnic group; it only means a language group. What used to be previously known as the Dravidian race, now means two racial groups, viz., (1) Proto-Australoids and (2) Proto-Negroids. The original inhabitants of Bengal were predominantly Proto-Australoids. This racial group

is presumed to have once inhabited the entire region from Central India to South India and beyond Ceylon upto Australia.

Another pre-vedic Indian people emerged from the Alpine group, whose chief physical characteristic was that they were long-faced. These people inhabited the Indus valley region. According to some anthropologists, the modern Bengali race is mainly a mixture of the Alpine and proto-Australoid ethnic groups.

Modern anthropologists also reject the widely held theory and assumption of an Aryan race. According to them and also according to Max Mueller, the word 'Aryan' signifies a language group; the vedic dialect is known as *chhandas*. The people who spoke this language belonged to the Nordic races.

The language of the Eastern Indian people used to be called *asura*. This is supposed to be an Austric language. About the sixth century B.C., this language is known to have been in use in *Rarh* (lower Bengal) and *Sumbha*. From the two languages the Austric and the Dravidian, many words are known to have been incorporated into the Sanskrit language. An authority in this field, T. Burrows, thinks that quite a few Sanskrit words have been traced to the early Austro-Asiatic peoples who inhabited the eastern frontier of India (vide : *The Sanskrit Language,* p. 375). One of the evidences that the vedic people came in contact with these Austric and Dravidian peoples and that there were cultural exchanges and racial mixing between them is this interchange of words in the two languages. One such word is *langal* meaning plough. This is an Austric word, which was incorporated into vedic *chhandas* at a very early stage. Some scholars even conclude from this one evidence that the nomadic vedic Aryans did not know cultivation and had learnt it from these Austric peoples, and that this is the reason why they did not have any name for the instrument used in cultivation. (The word, *langal,* is only once used in Rig Veda in 4/57/4 whereas the word used earlier and oftener is *Brik* (1/117/21). Evidently the Rig Vedic people also had knowledge about cultivation, although the word *langal* may have been borrowed by the vedic people from the earlier settled peoples).

Besides rice, the Austric peoples also used to produce bananas, brinjals, gourds, lemons, coconut, oranges, betelnuts and many other fruits and vegetables whose names are also Austric in origin. Even cloth made out of cotton wool was originally an Austric industry. All these reveal that the Austric people were predominantly an agricultural and settled people.

The vedic people, on the other hand, were mainly a cattle raising nomadic community and had learnt agriculture from these earlier settled peoples of India, known as *Dasyus*. Linguists further think that the word for the chief agricultural tool *langal* is derived from *linga* (*phallus*). This brings us to a very important revelation about the two divergent thoughts current in ancient India. One is the vedic, predominated by male gods; and the other the non-vedic, based on the central ideal of *sakti*, of primal energy and the Mother Goddess. This latter trend is the Tantric trend that considered the female energy as the primary cause of the universe and creation, which is the central concept of Tantra.

We know that the *linga* (phallus) worship, which was known to have been prevalent among the Indus people also, had been much maligned by the Rig vedic people. It is also known that the cult of *linga* later gave rise to *Siva-linga* and *Sakti-Yoni,* which have an intimate relation with *matrika puja* and serpent worship. All these clearly reveal the Tantric tradition.

Much light on the life and thought of ancient Bengal can probably be obtained by a critical examination of the social anthropology of the Atharva Veda, Tantra and other Eastern Indian religious practices. It has been held by many that Kapila, the propounder of Sankhya philosophy, was pre-vedic; Sankaracharya argued that Kapila was non-vedic and hence unacceptable. Many also consider that Kapila belonged to eastern India and most probably to Bengal proper. That the famous place of pilgrimage, Sagar Islands, at the mouth of the Ganges near the Bay of Bengal, might be the place where Kapila preached his philosophy is not improbable; in fact, evidence tends to establish this. The islands are also mentioned in the Mahabharata as a famous place of

pilgrimage. The reputed Sanskrit scholar, Monier Williams wrote: "in all probability the Tantric doctrine owes its development to the popularising of the Sankhya theory of *Purusha* (male agent) and *Prakriti* (female energy)."

Monier Williams further held that the magical formularies of Tantra had an intimate connection with the Atharva Veda. This is further corroborated by the Bengali encyclopaedia, *Viswakosh.* One of the famous Tantric texts, *Yantra-Yamini* of Damodar, says it is the essence of Atharva Veda. This would shed much light on the early history of the ancient Indian religious text, the Vedas, which, as we are aware, were originally three in number [even up to the time of Kautilya (3rd century B.C.), who mentions only three Vedas], but were later raised to four, presumably as a result of the compromise between the vedic people of the north and the non-vedic people inhabiting the eastern regions of India at a very early time. This inclusion of the Atharva Veda within the sacred fold gave rise to what is commonly known today as Hinduism with predominant Tantric influence, although retaining a formal vedic super-structure. The eminent scholar, Chintaharan Chakravarty has written "The rites of the Atharva Veda have in many cases a close and striking similarity to those of Tantras" (*Tantras, Studies of their Religion and Literature,* p. 14).

As a matter of fact, the first *mantra* of the Atharva Veda of the Saunaka school is the basis not only of the Ayurvedic medical system but also of the Tantric philosophy. The first *mantra* emphasises on the functions of the human body. It says that the three biological elements of the body (*tridhatu*) - *vayu* (wind), *pitta* (bile) and *cauf* (phlegm), which are the three basic factors in Ayurvedic medical science as well as the seven essential ingredients of the human body, viz. *rasa* (serum or chyle), *rakta* (blood), *mangsa* (flesh), *meda* (fat) *majja* (marrow), *asthi* (bone), and *sukra* (semen) have to be properly regulated and strengthened by utterances of sounds of *mantras.* These sounds have been divided into 51 syllables of the Tantric alphabet (vedic alphabet also has the same number of syllables but is slightly different

from the Tantric alphabet) and correspond to the 51 focal points of the body. The garland of 51 skulls that hang round the neck of goddess Kali are symbols of these syllables or primary sounds.

The 51 *pithasthanas* (sacred places of pilgrimage) of the Tantric school represent the fifty-one primal organs of the goddess. Interestingly, the great pundit, Sayanacharya (12th century A.D.) has given a mystic-spiritual interpretation of this first *mantra* of Atharva Veda and so far no vedic pundit has gone deep into this mantra and its relation with Tantra. This *mantra* has not also been included in the tenth *Mandala* of the Rig Veda which however included many other *mantras* from the Atharva Veda when the two ancient traditions merged and Atharva Veda was included as the fourth veda in the grand vedic panorama of the Aryans. [An article on this *mantra* has recently been written by Pandit Paritosh Thakur in *Ved Vicar* (Vedic Studies), Vol. I, No. IV].

The history of the Vedas also tells us that Atharva Veda had a religious tradition distinct from the *Rik, Sama* and *Yajur* Vedas, the three orthodox vedic texts. It is now widely held that the content of Atharva Veda reflects a much more ancient and primitive faith, though its form appears to be a later one. Rig Veda mentions Atharva and Angiras, two principal rishis of Atharva Veda, as forefathers in a number of slokas, viz., 1/62/2; 1/71/2: 1/83/5: 1/139/9: 7/76/4 and 10/14/6. The magical formularies contained in the Atharva Veda used to be transmitted only through a line of initiated disciples by their *gurus,* a form still in practice among the Brahmins and probably taken over from the people who practised the Atharva vedic magical cults. In fact, this practice of 'initiation' by the guru, also gave rise to hereditary priesthood and the practice of chanting secret mantras for the attainment of specific desires, which was absent in the other three vedic traditions.

O. Schraeder, another great authority on Indian religion writes in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (Aryan Religion,* p. 43) : "In India, even before the vedic times, the hereditary dignity of the Brahmins had been developed from those

families of primitive tribes that were expert in magic. From their midst arose the domestic priest (*purohit*) who was indispensable to the king for preparing sacrifices." These magical rites, which formed the basis of the Tantric cult, presumably belonged to the tradition of the Atharva Veda, which was later incorporated into the sacred order of Rig Vedic tradition.

An enquiry into the meaning of the *vratya* and the peoples referred to by the word may also throw much light upon the conflict between the vedic and non-vedic peoples in this early period. And from all we know these *vratyas* belonged to the non-Aryan tradition and seem to have been the original exponents of the Tantric and Atharva Vedic tradition.

The seventeenth chapter of the principal *Brahmana* of the Sama Veda, which has been referred to by the late Haraprasad Sastri in his essay on 'The Absorption of the *Vratyas,'* says : "they utter poisonous words (garagiro) because they covet food prepared for Brahmins in inhabited quarters. They declare cultured speech as difficult to pronounce; they punish with death those who do not deserve punishment, and though uninitiated they utter words that only the initiated are allowed to pronounce."

The ceremonies through which the *vratyas* were purified and admitted into the vedic society, differed at least in one particular aspect from the other great ceremonies of the vedic times; while the others had only the sacrificer and his wife in the hall of sacrifice, in these ceremonies thousands of sacrificers used to be admitted in the hall during each ceremony. This distinction very probably indicated the mass conversion of non-Aryans into the Aryan fold in those ancient times.

Sastri continued : "after conversion they were not allowed to bring their possessions in *vratya* life and had to leave them to those who remained *vratyas* still, to the so-called Brahmins of the Magadhadesa, who were looked down upon by the Rishis." Who were these so-called Brahmins? Evidently, they seem to be the Brahmins of the non-vedic tradition, the hereditary priests of the Atharva Vedic tradition, who probably lived in the eastern region

of India either from the beginning or after being driven away from the north by the early vedic Aryans.

The process of purification of the *vratyas* has been elaborately treated in the *Panchavinsa Brahmana* of Sama Veda, though it must have started much earlier than the time when this *Brahmana* of Sama Veda was composed.

Atharva Veda also contains a chapter on the glorification of *vratyas*. That chapter mentions seven of the eight *murtis* (different forms) of Siva that the Hindus worship to this date. There is a view that Siva is the same as Rudra of the Rig Veda; but Siva's resemblance to Rudra is remote, whereas his resemblance to the eight forms is closer and more intimate.

Haraprasad Sastri further wrote : "Rudra was a vedic deity invoked in many sacrifices; he had a share of the offerings to vedic sacrifices. But Siva had none, and his admission produced a great commotion typified in *Dakshya-yagna.*"

With the infusion of new blood into the vedic fold, new ideas seem to have originated, and all the extra-sacrificial ideas in the later portions of the *Brahmanas,* in the *Aranyakas* and the Upanishads, can be attributed to this infusion of new blood.

There is another matter in which the distinction between the original Rig Vedic rishis and the purified *vratyas* is clearly felt in the Brahmanic society. The Brahmins claim their descent from the seven rishis of the Rig Veda and from the sage Agastya. These eight are the roots of the *gotras,* which constitute the foundation of the *gotra* system in the Brahmanic society. Bhrigu and Angirasas, though ancient rishis, have no place in the gotra system of the Rig Veda. They are the original rishis of the Atharva Veda. The marriage of the Rig Veda rishis is guided by one set of rules, and that of the Atharva Veda rishis by another.

As already referred to earlier, it appears that Atharva Veda and Tantra had a close relationship, even if they had not originated from the same source; and they probably belonged to a tradition

other than that of the Rig Veda and this other tradition had dominated eastern Indian life and thought since primitive times.

It also appears that before the advent of vedicism, Bengal had retained an original religious tradition of its own, based on Atharva Veda and Tantra, and was but little influenced by the Aryan or Vedic religion. Bengal, in fact, remained a seat of Tantra until Buddhism swept the province. Brahmanism, as we know it today, was the last to enter the religious scene in Bengal; and even when it did, it generally remained as a sort of super-religion dominating the outer forms, but beneath its surface the original faiths and practices of the land remained dominant.

The Tantric Tradition

Commenting on 'Manu-Samhita', the famous Sanskrit scholar Kulluka Bhatta, (about 15th century A.D.) said : *srutisca dwi-vidha vaidiki tantriki ca;* meaning, sruti (revelation) is two-fold, Vedic and Tantric. The import of this significant statement has been largely ignored or misunderstood; it would otherwise have revealed important historical knowledge about ancient Indian social polity. It is now an accepted fact that two-thirds of modern Hinduism is Tantric in content and only one-third is Vedic. There has not been any serious enquiry into the contribution of Tantra to Hindu life and thought; although the key to the history and culture of Bengal lies hidden in Tantra.

A significant seal discovered in Harappa has , on one side, a female figure with her legs stretched apart and a tree blossoming out of her womb. This seal, which no doubt reflects a very primitive belief held by the Indus valley people, throws much light on the beliefs current among the original peoples of India, although the six-lettered inscription on it has yet to be deciphered. The seal undoubtedly can be interpreted as an expression of the primitive belief that intimate relation existed between the fertility of woman and vegetation. The ideas of magic, magical rites and formularies, which constitute the essential features of Tantra, seem to have been born out of this primitive belief. Because of this very

foundation of Tantric belief, the position of woman in Tantric culture is very high in contrast to the subordinate status that women occupy in vedic Aryan society.

Primitive man must have ascribed secret power to women believing that as they could produce a child out of nothing they possessed the power to produce crops also, with the same secret power. Primitive Bengali society, in other words, the society represented in Tantric and Atharva Vedic cultures, thus provides extensive support to Robert Briffault's researches and theory in this respect.

A large number of myths and rites can still be found among the tribal and native population of Bengal and neighbouring areas, which connect woman with the invention of agriculture. In Bankura district, a social rite is still extensively prevalent and practised almost universally, known as the *Bhadu Puja.* According to one modern account, Bhadu was the daughter of the former Raja of Panchet, who died a virgin for the good of the people. In commemoration of her death the Bagdis and Bauris, two aboriginal castes, carry in procession an effigy representing her, on the last day of the Bengali month of *Bhadra,* about the middle of September, during the rainy season, the period of the first harvest. There is no doubt that the modern legend is a rather recent interpolation. But the myth and the celebration clearly represent the sybolic cult of fertility. No priests are required for this puja; the women and the children of each family chant songs, day after day, before this idol, which is surrounded with flowers, for about a month. And, on the last and most important day, which falls on the last day of *Bhadra,* "the worshippers forget all work in their loud and boisterous worship of Bhadu". R.C. Dutta, the reputed sociologist and historian of 19th century India, commenting on this puja wrote : "the goddess Bhadu ... is imagined to be a princess of excessive goodness and beauty, who took pity on the conditions of the poor Bauris and died at an early age. . . . There can be no doubt that the worship is connected in some way with the early rice harvest which commences in *Bhadra.*"

An intimate relation was thus conceived between fertility and agriculture, in both of which women were productive agents. On this belief ideas of magic developed among the primitive people, the most important among which was to fulfil a desire by means of a medium, or symbol. The first real productive work that man experienced was the production of a child by woman, and women took to agriculture while men were still hunters. Hence primitive man must have tried to correlate, in some way, the family's most important productive activity agriculture with sexual reproduction. Viewed in this light, the Harappan seal becomes very meaningful, and throws much light on the social anthropology of ancient India.

We also have the evidence of one of the most sacred *Puranas* of the Hindus, the *Markandeya Purana,* where the Devi Mother Durga, is conceived exactly as the figure on the Harappan seal. In the *Devi-Mahatmya* portion of the *Purana,* the Goddess is described as existing eternally, embodied in the world. "By her the universe was stretched forth . . . . She is the creator of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva." (In the earliest extant religious poetry of Bengal, and *Dharma Mangala Kavyas,* the deities Brahma, Vishnu and Siva are supposed to have been born out of the primal energy, *adyasakti,* which is conceived as the consort of the *Dharma Thakur,* a later Bengali Buddhist version of the Sun God).

The most significant part of the text in the *Markandeya Purana,* however, is the following : "I shall support (nourish) the whole world with life-sustaining vegetables, which shall grow out of my body, during a period of rain. I shall then gain fame as *Sakambhari* (herb-bearing or herb-nourshing)." Devi is also described as killing the *asuras, Sumbha, Nisumbha, Durgama* who are all conceived as the demons of drought; and Durga, as *Sakambhari,* is conceived as the goddess of corn. According to *Devi-Mahatmya,* and also according to Bengali custom, the year's most important festival is related to worship of Durga and is performed in autumn, which is the time when crops begin to ripen and the main harvest is near. Further, an important aspect of the

Durga Puja in Bengal is *navapatrika-pravesa,* or the worship of the nine plants, which also reveals that the goddess was conceived as the personification of the vegetation spirit. According to the late R.P. Chanda, another great Bengali scholar, "the legend . . . connecting the worship of Durga in autumn with Rama's slaying Ravana is unknown to the Ramayana of Valmiki." According to the *Ramayana* of Valmiki (IV, 105), he writes, "Rama worshipped Surya, the Sun God and not Durga at the instance of the sage Agastya, before his last encounter with Ravana." Chanda tells us that "this legend, therefore, was evidently invented to explain the transformation of Durga as the vegetation spirit to the war-goddess and brings her worship in line with epic Brahmanism." This was presumably made when the final rapprochement between the two major religious faiths of ancient India, the Tantric and the Vedic, took place, giving final form to what has come to be known as Hinduism today. A careful and comparative study of the three hymns (the two Durga-stotras in the *Mahabharata* and the third, *Arya-Stava,* in *Harivansa of Vishnu Purana,* leaves no doubt that by the time they were composed, a great deal of development had taken place in the worship of the goddess and many elements, Vedic, epic and Puranic and some definitely non- or un-Aryan, had merged to give it its developed shape (vide J.N. Banerjee, *Puranic and Tantric Religion,* University of Calcutta, 1966, p. 119). The comparative broadness and elasticity of Hindu religion is also partly due to the fact that it has incorporated within itself numerous local cults and two major faiths of ancient India.

The significant characteristics of Tantra may be summarised as follows. Firstly, the predominance of the female goddesses; secondly, the high respect accorded to women who are supposed to be the embodiment of the female energy; and thirdly, the employment of magical practices with the aid of symbols. A study of Bengal's social life will reveal its predominantly Tantric character, though later Brahmanic domination changed the religious super-structure to a great degree, albeit superficially. In most of the social and religious practices of Bengal, a special place

is still found for exclusively feminine rites, which can be traced either to the original supremacy of women in the economic, social and religious life of Bengal, or in terms of ideology to the respect female energy commanded here since primitive times. Some of the religious observances which are prevalent even to this day, like Chandi, Shitala, Manasa, Bhadu and Tusu pujas, carry the original Tantric traits in them. The identity of the objects of worship of these pujas further reveals their non-Aryan character, which goes to show the close connection between Tantric beliefs and the non-Aryan ethnic group of peoples. It may be mentioned in this connection that when *suttee* was introduced in Bengal by the vedic Brahmins, *Mahanirvan Tantra,* (about 14th century A.D.) one of the principal schools of Tantra, opposed it on the ground that it degraded womanhood, which embodies the female energy.

The goddess *Chandi,* as is evident from all references in old Bengali literature, is a non-Aryan deity. *Chandi* is the daughter of *Hadi* (a very low caste in Brahmanic caste hierarchy belonging to the untouchable group). *Hadir jhi Chandi Ma* (meaning, Mother *Chandi* is the daughter of *Hadi*) is a very familiar expression. It is now known that *hadis,* in olden times, used also to perform priestly functions in many Kali temples, and are said to be still doing so in remoter areas of Bengal. They are the custodians of many temples of *Shitala,* the goddess of small-pox. In *Harisidhya,* one of the famous *mainamati* ballads of eastern Bengal, there is mention of a *hadi* raised to the status of a great sage.

The reputed Bengali anthropologist, the late Sarat Kumar Roy, held that the worship of Chandi has come down to Hindu society from the Oraons, a tribal people. It is also mentioned in many early Bengali works of literature that naked Oraon youth used to worship *Chandi* at midnight. These original faiths, the worship of *Chandi, Shitala,* and other goddesses, reveal clearly the influence of the magical cults of Tantra on later Hindu life, and its deep influence on Bengali culture. The *hadis* seem to have been the original exponents and priests of this cult and must have occupied a decent position in society, which is probably why they

were much maligned and relegated to the status of untouchables by the later Brahmanic society. They might have also courted this by their vigorous resistance to Brahmanic aggression on their culture.

The evidence of Tantra can also be found in the folk tales, the *rupakathas* of Bengal. In these tales we find mention of sages, who, by uttering incantations over a body cut to pieces, could rejoin the pieces and make the body whole and alive again. These magical practices are absent in the Rig Vedic tradition. In the legend of *Harisidhya* of the Mymensingh ballads, the sage Harisidhya displays similar feats, and gods come down to offer him their services. The attribution of magical powers to man, even greater than those of the gods, is a special feature of the folk tales of Bengal and indicates a Tantric heritage. In the *brata-kathas,* tales connected with the religious observances of vows by women which seem to have come down from antiquity and are ingrained in the social life and beliefs of Bengali women, the deities addressed are mostly unknown to the Aryan vedic tradition. Some of their names are also non-Sanskritic and appear a little incongruous in the modern Sanskritised Bengali language. Their modes of worship too are quite distinct from the vedic tradition, like *Itu, Bon, Bibi, Olai Chandi, Jwarasur* (from jwar, that is, fever), *Magh Mangal, Punyi Pukur* etc. The hymns addressed to these deities are couched in the oldest form of Bengali, the *prakrit* (the 'paisachi') dialect, and is a little difficult to understand now.

Similarly, the origin of the worship of the Bengali women's god, *Laul,* is also lost in obscurity. This deity, like another called *Thua,* is represented by a conical piece of clay. This object is covered with floral decorations, and two arms are attached to it. The religious observances connected with *Thua* and *Laul* must have been chthonic and outside the Aryan pale. According to the late Dinesh Chandra Sen, to whom goes the credit of resuscitating early Bengali literature and folk songs and culture, the Aryans seem to have been opposed to these practices; but the new brides were non-Aryan who could not give up easily their own heritage.

So these observances were introduced into the Aryan homes through inter-marriage with non-Aryans. Likewise, the worship of *Chandi* and *Manasa* was also not originally favoured by the Aryans, and was said to have been similarly introduced by young brides, who bore oppression and great suffering in doing so, apart from the usual mother-in-law's oppression.

The archaic forms and words in the hymns and worship of these deities and many others suggest a very early origin; they seem to have originated when the Bengalis were at the height of their maritime activities (3rd century A.D. to 10th century A.D.) subsequently prohibited by Ballal Sena's diktat. The chart used at the worship of the goddess *Bhaduli* is full of symbolical things denoting sea voyages. Seven seas, thirteen rivers, the sandy beaches, rafts, sea fowls, etc.are mentioned. *Bhaduli* used to be worshipped in the month of August when the rivers were full and the monsoon high, and people were anxious for the welfare of their dear ones. Who the goddess *Bhaduli* was, is not known. In one of the hymns she is called the mother-in-law of Indra, as in one passage *Laul* is called the elder brother of Siva. These seem later attempts to connect them in some crude way with the deities of the vedic pantheon. According to Dr. D.C. Sen, the clay figurines made in connection with the celebration bear a strong similarity with the clay figures discovered by Evans in Crete of the Third millennium B.C., and some of the finds of the Pandurajar Dhibi excavations suggest an affinity.

One of the features of Tantric cult is to use a symbol in the attempt to fulfil a desire by uttering certain secret mystic words. In later Bengali belief, particularly evident among womenfolk, we find barren women desirous of having children, hanging bricks or stones on the grills of doors in the temples of local goddesses or of Siva, in order to conceive. This practice of women is evidently essentially Tantric, where the brick serves as the symbol.

A serious anthropological study into the history and culture of Bengal will perhaps reveal significant facts about the rigour of the distinctive social and religious practices of eastern India, which

kept its tradition so much apart from the Aryan vedic tradition of northern India. This distinctive social tradition, which permeated even the later Brahmin-dominated society of Bengal, should be studied properly in order to discover the roots and history of Bengali culture, which still distinguishes Bengalis from the peoples of other parts of India.

CHAPTER III

LIFE AND LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL BENGAL

The folk tales and ballads of Bengal, prior to Brahmanic domination of the province, not only give an insight into the cultural life of Bengal in an earlier era, but also reveal to us the simple yet lively and realistic literature that existed in Bengal about which little was known until lately. It is generally held, though erroneously, that Bengali literature is an off-shoot of Sanskirt literature and a part of it. In fact, however, Bengali literature has a distinct tradition of its own and developed independently of Sanskrit literature. Whatever evidences are found in the form of folk tales and ballads show distinctiveness in language, style and portraiture.

The Bengali ballads can be traced to the early Pala period (6th century A.D.) and even to times prior to it; it can reasonably be assumed that a long line of previous story-tellers and bards made and remade many of the old and often still unknown ballads and tales. Eastern Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh), which formed a part of the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotishpur, has been the storehouse of medieval Bengali ballads and it is from there that the gems of medieval Bengali ballads were first recovered. With the decadence of the power of Pala kings eastern Mymensingh gradually separated itself from the empire and asserted independence, forming several small principalities ruled mostly by *Rajvansis, Hajongs* and the *Koches*. The last Rajvansi chiefs, Lakshan Hazra and Ram Hazra, were ousted from their seat in Jangalbari of Kishoregunge by Isa Khan about 1590 A.D. The

principalities in eastern Mymensingh, later known Muazzamabad, extended as far as Laur in Sylhet and were finally conquered by Hussain Shah of Gaur in 1523. From the Garo escarpment to the northern frontiers of Dacca district, a vast tract of country had for long been ruled by the *Rajas* of Kamrup ('Kamrup' was an early name for Assam). The faith was Tantrism intermixed with Buddhist and Jain ideas. Brahmanic religion and life began to invade this part of India after the overthrow of the tribal chief, Vaisya Garo, by Someswar Pathak, a Brahmin adventurer from Kanauj, the founder of the present family of the Maharajas of Susang, in 1280 A.D. The river, Someswari, bears the name of the tutelary goddess of this Brahmin conqueror. Eastern Mymensingh, for a long time, refused to accept Brahmanic religion, based on orthodoxy and 'kulinism'; and the enemies of Ballal Sen, the powerful Brahmin ruler of medieval Bengal who gave vedic Brahmanism state patronage, often took refuge in the regions of eastern Mymensingh.

The whole of eastern Mymensingh, however, remained under the influence of non-Aryan peoples, who were powerful yet peace-loving, and were fond of art and literature. Some scholars, including the late Nagendra Nath Basu, the well-known editor of the Bengali Encyclopaedia, *Viswakosh,* had attempted to prove that these people were the same as the *Panis* referred to in the Rig Veda. The culture of the people of eastern Mymensingh, who carried with them the original tradition of Bengal, is manifest in the ballads and folklore recovered from there. We find from them that in contrast to later Brahmanic society the girls married after attaining puberty and according to their own choice. There were regular schools (the *Tols*) for imparting education in the primary, secondary and higher stages and neither caste nor sex was any bar to education. Girls received the same education as boys. In the old *Chandikavya* story, we find that Srimanta, though a bania by caste, received the same kind of education as that received by the Brahmin boys. We find Phullara, the flower-girl, quoting the *Sastras;* and Khullana, the *bania* lady recognising her husband's hand-writing.

The story of *Vidyasundar* in which Princess Vidya challenged all the princes to a literary contest is based in part on historical fact.

The ballads of Bengal are the gems of medieval Bengali literature and represent the life and love of the people as then prevalent. The style and richness of these ballads, regarding whose history and origin little is known at present, can be compared to the great lyrics of any age. We often hear of sea voyages which reveal that they belonged to a people who till then did not subscribe to Brahmanic restrictions on sea voyages, which came later, and we know from history that Bengal had extensive sea trade with countries of the Far East both before and during the reign of the Pala dynasty. These ballads are also completely untainted by Brahmanic ideals and have no resemblance to Sanskrit literary conventions. One breathes in them complete freedom. The female characters vary greatly, rarely belong to any particular pattern or stereotype, and surprisingly, never allow social inhibitions to regulate their love-life.

In one such ballad, *Andha-bandhu* (Blind Friend), a princess leaves her husband confessing to him that she loved a blind beggar with whom she elopes without shame or remorse. On reading the ballad one finds that the author, far from being dismayed by her supposedly wayward conduct, is filled with admiration for a woman truly in love. Love and mutual attractions between man and woman as depicted in this and other ballads, gives a joyful picture of freedom, in which there is no trace of shame or remorse. In later periods after Brahmanism had installed itself in Bengal, a Vaishnava sect, the *Sahajiyas,* were on the other hand much ridiculed and maligned by the Brahmanic hierarchy for advocating and practising such freedom in life and love.

Another immortal ballad, *Mahua,* is also a story of love told in an epic manner. The scene describing Mahua carrying the body of her dead fianceÇ reminds one of the Dionysian dance of Siva carrying Sati. When at first her foster father asked Mahua not to entertain the illusion of marrying her affluent lover, she obeyed him and left the city. She also thought that probably her

lover might not ultimately agree to marry her while she would have staked everything for him. But when she later found out that her lover did love her truly and sincerely she immediately left with him on horseback. Her fianceÇ was killed during the return ride by tradesmen who were captivated by her beauty and charm and tried to tempt her by offering money and valuable things. She was forcibly taken on board a ship. But she remained steadfast in her love. With an axe she made a hole in the bottom of the ship which sank thereafter. The story ends with the following touching words of Mahua to her father standing before the dead body of her fianceÇ whom she carried back, "You should not try to marry me with Sujan, father. Can't you see the difference between Sujan and my husband? Pray, look at him with my eyes." Saying these words, she ran a knife into her chest and fell dead upon her lover's body. The Bengali verse, which only those versed in the dialect can understand, is remarkable in language and style and is totally devoid of Sanskrit influence. *Mahua* is but one of a large number of such ballads.

Behula, another song of love, seems to belong to an age when Brahmanism had not yet installed itself in Bengal. The ideas expressed no doubt belong to an age preceding the establishment of modern social life in Bengal. Behula, the heroine, and Menoka, another female character, selected their husbands at the age of seventeen. Behula fell in love with the trader's son, Madan, and no restrictions seemed to have existed in this love-making as their conduct was not questioned even when they made love to strangers before their marriages. The present day Bengali society, which is only a few centuries old, could not possibly have conceived such situations as those described in the ballad. We also find that even when the merchant is distributing money at a religious function, the poet refers to the poor only; the Brahmins are not mentioned at all as recipients. Yet they, in Brahmanic society, are the ones who generally are the principal and the foremost recipients of such gifts. The ballad also gives a graphic description of the richness of Bengal in those days, its architecture and also its trade.

The ideal of love predominates throughout this ballad too. The heroine, Behula, even when surrounded by many suitors, and in adverse circumstances, remains devoted to the merchant hero, Madan, and never breaks her vow of love. She does not care for the institution of marriage, and holds love as more important.

The early Bengali poets, like the people themselves, did not suffer from puritanic, moral inhibitions. They completely ignored all social taboos that are evident in Sanskrit literature, and easily and beautifully depicted the lives and loves of the people. They depicted these in such a bold manner that they would at times even incur the censure of modern enlightened societies; yet they never faltered, and always remained true to their sense of art and values. The late Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen, the pioneer in the field of research in early Bengali literature, commenting on the ballads, wrote : "(Even) Rabindra Babu (Tagore) ultimately made his heroine come back from her natural love and desire; and did not dare to defy the puritanic Brahmanic concepts of chastity and morality. But the village poets never faltered." They depicted whatever they saw and felt, and depicted them beautifully and without hesitation. The female characters in these ballads, *Andha-bandhu, Shyam Roy, Dhopar Maath,* are unchaste in terms of modern Hindu ideals; but they are made perfect incarnations of love which even orthodox Hindus will not dare deny.

A comparison between the works of these poets and classical Sanskrit literature is illuminating. The Bengali poets depicted the lives and loves of the common people; their language and style were simple and sweet; the Sanskritists dealt with kings and vedic heroes and had naturally been engrossed in the rich atmosphere of the princely and ruling families. Their language therefore was also rich and represented little of the common people's lives. The poets of Bengal dealt with simple, real and natural surroundings, with life as it was lived by the common man. Yet they created a form of beauty not in any way inferior to that of the classical Sanskrit poets.

In Sanskrit, Brahmanic-dominated literature, there is glorification of Brahmanic ideals. At every stage, the reader notices social restraint, whereas the indigenous literature of Bengal is absolutely free from such restrictions. The heroes and heroines succeed in, or succumb for, love in the most natural manner.

The Sanskritic era in Bengali literature, which began after the establishment of Brahmanic domination, marks also the introduction of rigid control in life and strict social laws. Its declared aim was to counteract an alleged laxity in society during the later Buddhist times. The Brahmins introduced such rigidity and control that the free flow of social life in Bengal was disrupted. This was the primary reason for a great number of people converting themselves into Muslims.

But wherever Brahmanism, introduced under the State patronage of the Sena kings, could not dominate, there the original free atmosphere in social life remained, and social taboos were absent. Chittagong, Sylhet and Eastern Mymensingh are some of these places, and it is from these places that the present knowledge of early Bengali life and literature is obtained. In these places people could maintain their social isolation because of natural geographical advantages through the centuries, immediately preceding the Mohammedan conquest, and thus maintain their cultural freedom from Brahmanic domination. And thus the original ballads were saved.

In Sanskrit literature, dominated by Brahmanic ideas, the approved age for marriage of a girl was eight years; and in the event the girl reached the age of eleven or twelve and attained puberty, this became a calamity for the family and for the girl's father. Later, under Brahmanic domination, in Bengal too, freedom of women was suppressed, and in the Bengali poems of the 17th and 18th centuries this reached a climax. Joynarayan, a Bengali poet of the 18th century, puts the following 'piece of advice' in the mouth of Chandra Bhan, the hero, while addressing his consort Sunetra on the eve of his departure : "During my absence, Oh Sunetra, shun the shadows of all male persons as one would shun

black snakes. If the voice of any male person reaches your ears, consider it as terrible as the sound of thunder". This is in conformity with the ideal of Sita, when she, suspected by Rama, says in defence : "Even when I was a mere child I never came too close to a male play-fellow". Compared to these moral strictures, what a freedom, self-confidence and joy one finds in women depicted in the earlier ballads of Bengal.

Later, the Vaishnavas revolted against the orthodoxy of Brahmin-dominated society and made an attempt to spritualise free love through the *Sahajiya* songs. They resurrected Bengali spirit and culture at a time when it was faced with total extinction under Brahmanic domination. And the best poetry in Bengali literature belong undoubtedly to the Vaishnavas. There is a striking similarity between the early rural ballads and the early Vaishnava lyrics in spirit and outlook; not that the two mutually influenced each other profoundly, but both seem to have got their inspiration from the rich treasure of romantic spirit and love that pervaded Bengal in the early days. This might have partly been due to the spread of *Sahajiya* cult which drew its inspiration from Buddhism ever since Buddhism had swept the province at a very early period of her history. Thus every poet who saw and studied life got vivid poetical images from the homes and people at first hand. Their works reflect the richness of emotion that in a sense, pervaded the entire atmosphere in Bengal at that time.

The literature of the *Sahajiyas,* which exist mainly in the form of lyrics and songs, also shows that it is a phase of Buddhism in Bengal. Though they are clearly Buddhistic in origin, these songs later became identified with the Vaishnava religion. The Sufis, among Mohammedans, who were also converts from Buddhism, similarly retained the original Sahajiya philosophical ideas. The romantic spirit of the *Sahajiyas* is a part of their religious creed. The *Sahajiyas* practise free love as a means to attain salvation; it is a form of *Sadhana* for them. They believe that a man's spiritual salvation lies in those means which are available to everyone, and this salvation can only be attained through the medium of love.

According to them, love of the human being is the first step towards the attainment of spiritual love and salvation. And hence they maintain that the highest form of love can only be attained through the natural (*sahaja)* love of man and woman.

The early Vaishnava ballads gave vent to this romantic love that the *Sahajiyas* had developed. That the *sahajiya* creed was extremely popular in Bengal during this period is evident from the following comment of the famous Vaishnava poet, Chandidas (late 14th to early 15th century) : "Everyone in our time aspires to be *sahajiya.* But how many of us know the true significance of the creed?" The song of the *Washer-maiden,* whose authorship remains clouded in anonymity, is one of the oldest and a very typical love-ballad of this type. The later Vaishnava ballads tend to become more propagandist, but, in this ballad, a freshness and the unsophisticated charm of country life can be felt. According to the late Dr. D.C. Sen, "it seems to belong to an age, when Chandidas, the gay bard of Nanoor, sang his immortal songs". Indeed the ballad has many verses which are almost identical with some of Chandidas's poems.

The ballad narrates the story of a washer-maiden, Kanchanmala, a handsome girl belonging to a low caste, who is attracted by a handsome young prince. The prince one day passionately seizes her hand which touches off a romantic love affair between them. The poet describes, with great power, the advances of the loving young prince, and, on the other hand, the timid and hesitant approach of the maiden, conscious of her low social status and afraid of scandal. After they had made love, she becomes frightened by her passion and by the uncertain future of the love affair, but cannot help loving. When the prince comes to lie by her side among the leaves in the field, she sighs and reflects that for her sake the prince had stooped so low.

But later the prince abandons her; and thereafter the poet depicts the mind of the girl magnificently. She is stunned by the blow, but cannot speak out her grief to anybody. She tells her sorrows to the river, the boats and the trees. And finally to blot out

the memory of the love, lest it might cause pain to the prince, she drowns herself secretly and silently in the river and asks the waves "to carry her with them . . . into the boundless unknown."

These early ballads resembling the Vaishnava ones are essentially the tales of Bengali life before the advent of Islam, but today they are mostly sung by the Muslims, as is the case with the other ballads. The songs echo the tender emotions which later became the distinctive characteristics of the Vaishnava school. In these ballads and songs, not infrequently, one comes across the very words and phrases, expressed in a rather crude way, which have lent interest to Vaishnava poetry, which came later, and further show that the materials for the Vaishnava lyrics were there in life itself in those days.

It is now known, however, that some of the earliest Bengali ballads and songs used to be sung throughout a large part of northern India and Maharashtra in the 10th and 11th centuries. The song of *Behula,* the bride of Lakhinder, the song of *Mainamati,* depicting the life of Raja Gopi Chandra who embraced asceticism in the heydays of his youth, are some of those which found acclaim throughout India. They used to be sung in the typical tune of rural Bengali songs, the *Bhatiyal,* popularly known as *Bengal raga.*

The elevation of Bengali to a literary status after the Brahmanic domination of the province occured around the 14th century brought about by several factors of which the Mohammedan conquest was undoubtedly an important one. The anti-Brahmanic Buddhists of Bengal could feel safe only after the Mohammedans came to rule over this province. Dr. D.C. Sen wrote : "If the Hindu Kings continued to enjoy independence, Bengali language could scarcely have got an opportunity to find its way to the court of kings". That explains why a large number of non-Brahmanised Hindus and Buddhists converted themselves to Islam in Bengal and carried along with them the tradition of ancient Bengali literature and culture, which was imperilled after Bengal came under the domination of Brahmanism. Even the first rendering of the Sanskrit text of *Mahabharata* into Bengali was

undertaken at the order of Nasira Shah, the Pathan ruler of Gaur who reigned for forty years till 1325 A.D. Nasira Shah was a great patron of vernacular literature of this country and the fact that Vidyapati dedicated one of his songs to him speaks highly of him. Vidyapati wrote :

Nasira Shah knows it well, whom Cupid pierced
With his dart -Vidyapati says 'long live the emperor'.

The early Mohammedan rulers patronised Bengali literature greatly and gave to the Bengali language the status of a court language. The Bengali Muslims being mostly converts from Buddhism and Hinduism, also retained the original Bengali spirit and culture to a great extent. In the *Manasa Mangal Kavya,* Hussain Shah is described as "Sanatan-Husain Shah-Nripati-tilak", meaning "the traditional monarch Hussain Shah". It is said that Hussain Shah originally contemplated the cult of *Satyapir,* a new god unifying Buddhist and Islamic traditions which is still worshipped by both the Hindus and the Muslims. (*Satyapir* means 'the old truth' or 'the eternal truth'). And to propagate the qualities of this new cult the original version of the famous Bengali poem *Vidyasundar* was written. This has been made controversial however by Dr. R.C. Majumdar, who writes : "This claim (that Hussain Shah was the founder of the Satya Pir Cult) rests upon silly (*sic*) legend current in the 18th century. . . As a matter of fact, there is no evidence that the cult of Satya Pir was prevalent before the 17th century A.D" (*History of Medieval Bengal,* pp. 56-57). Most scholars however find Dr. Majumdar's objection untenable and this view has been upheld in the *Comprehensive History of India Vol. V* published by Indian History Congress in 1970, much to the chagrin of Dr. Majumdar.

Since the last decades of the sixteenth century however Mohammedan rule seems to have degenerated, as is evident from the ballads of this period. In *Kenaram* the poetess Chandravati describes the country as groaning under the rule of the Kazis; and in the story of *Malua* there are vivid illustrations of the oppressions of the Kazis. It seems that since the latter part of the 16th century,

Mohammedan bureaucracy had made their names dreaded in the countryside.

From this time Bengal was in a troubled state and the Hindu sub-lords had practically become independent and for all practical purposes defied the powers of the Sultan of Gaur. Orthodox Hinduism under the influence of Brahmanism strengthened at this time. Subsequent social and cultural conflicts, firstly between the two major Hindu sects the *Saktas* and the *Vaishnavas,* and secondly between the Hindus and Mohammedans, marred the social life of Bengal, reaching its murkiest levels in the 17th and 18th centuries.

When Brahmanism was introduced into this land, Bengal was permeated with Tantric rites and Buddhist ideas. Later, Buddha was transformed into *Dharma,* which became the most prominent social deity in every village. Songs and festivities in honour of *Dharma Thakur* became the craze of the people. It still dominates parts of rural Bengal. The festival, *Dharmer Gajan* was, in later times, converted into *Siver Gajan,* Siva having replaced *Dharma* under the influence of Brahmanism. The *Dharma Mangala* poems are full of glimpses of rural Bengali society of the pre-Mohammedan Hindu period, when Buddhist ideas were dominant in Bengal. The entire literature in honour of the deity *Dharma* was Buddhist in spirit. In the *Sunya Purana,* a Buddhist treatise of early 18th century, written by Ramai Pundit, (who was a *dom* by caste but later respected as a Brahmin), it is categorically stated that the *Dharma Raj* does not approve of rituals, which is in conformity with the spirit of original Buddhism. *Sunya Purana* is derived from the concept of *Sunya-vada* of the Madhyamika School of Buddhism.

A glimpse into the early history of Bengal will reveal that while Bengal had always been outside the pale of early vedic society, she had also resisted Brahmanic dominance in later times. Brahmanism developed in India from about the 2nd century B.C. with the accession of the Brahmins to political power under Pusyamitra. The Brahmins thus were able to maintain their supremacy only by the establishment of a social system which

was based upon the negation of the individual's rights and freedom, even in matters of love.

The codes of Manu (about 4th century A.D.) while still including Bengal within the geographical boundaries of Aryavarta, distinctly prohibit all contacts of the Brahmins with the people of Bengal. Ananda Tirtha, the famous commentator on *Aiterya Aranyaka* declared Bengal as the land inhabited by *pisachas* and *rukshasas*. Brahmanism therefore could not expect to thrive for many centuries amidst a people who were the pioneers of Buddhist and Jain ideas and were opposed to vedic rituals.

The Buddhist priests in the later part of the 10th century began to write books in a *prakrit* dialect called *Gauda prakrit*. This *prakrit* was also described by the Sanskrit grammarian, Krishna Pandit (12th century A.D.) as a form of *paisachi prakrit*. The earliest specimen of the language of Bengal that has been discovered is that of the Mahasthan inscription of about 2nd century B.C. The language used was akin to Magadhi Prakrit, denigrated by the Sanskritists as *paisachi prakrit*.

The earliest extant specimens of vernacular literature of Bengal are the *dohas* or *charya* literature dating from the latter half of the first millennium A.D. Prior to that, written literature was found either in Sanskrit or in a very few cases in Prakrit. Sanskrit language had come to Bengal even before Brahmanic culture and religion, probably through contacts established by Buddhist monks and merchants. The original language of Bengal was a mixture of Austric, Dravidian and the language of the round-headed Alpines. These latter groups spoke an Aryan language which was different from that of the Rig Vedic Aryans.

Patanjali distinguished between the two and commented that the people of eastern India used some verbs in special senses and also used "la" in place of "ra". He pointed out that this was a characteristic of the pronunciation of the *Asura* race. This was also a characteristic of *Magadhi Prakrit*. The original dialect of the Bengalis was probably a dialect akin to *Magadhi Prakrit*. The Bengali *prakrit* language had, however, attained such a high and

respectable position in the Buddhist world that even as late as the 17th and 18th centuries, Japanese Buddhist priests wrote their books in this dialect. The ballads and poems of Bengal have been written in this *prakrit* language; but the language and the dialect evolved steadily until, with the advent of Vaishnava saint, Sri Chaitanya, it attained its perfect form.

The ballads written in the earlier *prakrit* dialect sound strange even to modern Bengali ears used to Sanskritised Bengali, specially in respect of verbs. They display greater affinity to quaint *prakrit* forms than to current Bengali usages. Bengali language thus is a direct descendant from this *prakrit,* though the present Bengali has assumed a highly Sanskritised form since the 19th century. And this is the main feature by which one can distinguish early indigenous Bengali literature from the later Sanskritised Bengali literature.

CHAPTER IV

BUDDHISM IN BENGAL*

There is evidence that Bengal was inhabited by civilised people long before the Aryans had settled in Punjab.The Rig Veda does not mention Bengal but the *Aiteriya Aranyaka* of Rig Veda (2/1/1) does mention three ethnic groups, viz. *Banga, Bagadha* and *Cher*. Dravidians are generally known as *Cher*. Many tribes in Chotanagpur (Bihar) call themselves descendants of the *Cher*. They claim to have come to Chotanagpur from a place near Rohtasnagar (in South-Western Bihar), but they cannot say how long ago they had come. (According to Sarat Chandra Roy, Chirand, from where the Cheros came, near Chapra in Bihar, was a neolithic settlement dating back to about 3000 B.C.).

Some anthropologists say that a Dravidian race, called *Banga* or *Bang,* used to live in Bengal. The *Bagadha* ethnic group still exists in Bengal. The *Bagdis* of *Rahr* are their descendants. We know that the language in which they communicate with each other is not (modern) Bengali. The present-day upper castes, Brahmins, Kayasthas and Vaidyas, do not know that language. Some others think that Bagadha and Magadh are the same ethnic group, or stem from the same ethnic group. In some Vedas, Magadh is mentioned. A Brahmin is considered to have fallen from caste hierarchy if he lived in Magadh.

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*Based partly on an article under the same title by Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Sastri in *Udbodhan;* Ashar, 1324 B.S. (June-July-1917). The comments in parenthesis are the author's.

In North Bengal, there were three caste groups, viz. *Kirat,Paundra and Kaibarta.* The Vedic Aryans called them *Dasyus* meaning that they were enemies of the Aryans. The *Kirats* now live in the mountainous region between Darjeeling and Kathmandu. The Nepalis call them *Kirantis*. The *punrhs* of Malda are descendants of *Paundras*. Their capital, Paundra-vardhan, had been an important township of North Bengal from ancient times. The *Kaibartas* were also very powerful in North Bengal. Ballal Sen split them into two groups; kept one in North Bengal and sent the other to the border of present day Orissa. Even now *Kaibartas* predominate in these two regions. According to census reports, *Kaibartas* constitute the single largest caste group in Bengal.

These ethnic and caste groups lived in Bengal even before the birth of Gautama Buddha, and were to some extent civilised. We know that most of the later *Tirthankars* of the Jain religion (including Parsanath, c.817 B.C.) lived and meditated in Bengal, specially in the *Rarh* area before attaining sainthood and also established and preached their religion in this region. Many of the manners and customs of the Jain monks, including their dress are like those of Bengalis. That is also the same for Buddhist monks.

Many Western scholars also thought that both Buddhism and Jainism had originated from Sankhya philosophy. Interestingly, the ashram of Kapila, the propounder of Sankhya philosophy was in Bengal. In Khulna district (now in Bangladesh) there is still a place called Kapilmuni. In Gangasagar, in the southern tip of the Ganges, near the Bay of Bengal, there is an ashram of Kapilmuni where a big annual religious fair is still held in the middle of January. It has been categorically mentioned by Asvaghosa, the author of *Buddha-charit,* that Buddha in the beginning became a student-disciple of Sankhya pundits. Asvaghosa has even analysed what particular aspects of Kapila's Sankhya, Buddha had introduced changes on, and improved upon them. Sankaracharya considered Sankhya as outside the pale of the Vedas. In the first stanza of the second chapter of his commentary on Brahmasutra, Sankaracharya had clearly stated that there was no need to refute

Sankhya. Yet he said, he was doing it carefully because there could be misunderstanding that Manu and some other rishis had upheld Sankhya. Hence he thought it necessary to refute it.

Several centuries after Sankaracharya, Hemadri differentiated Sankhya from Kapila's philosophy. According to him those who were versed in Sankhya had a high position, but those who were versed in Kapila's philosophy had a very low standing, so much so that Kapila's followers could not even sit in the same row with the Brahmins. Hemadri further wrote that Bengalis should not be allowed to sit in the same row for eating at *Sraddhas*. It becomes evident that Bengal did not constitute part of the Aryan civilisation. The Vedic rishis and their descendants had scant respect for Bengalis. They said if one visited Bengal except for purposes of pilgrimage he shall have to go through atonement.

How then did the Brahmins come to Bengal? For those who do not accept anything unless it is found written on stone or copper plaques, it can be mentioned that in 432-33 A.D., during the reign of Kumaragupta, a Brahmin was gifted with a plot of land in the Rajshahi district (now in Bangladesh). The earliest Sanskrit inscription in Bengal, the one at Susunia Hill, also has a similar antiquity. About one hundred or one hundred and fifty years after that, some Brahmins were given land in Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) and they lived there. This is also mentioned in some copper plaques. Some pundits like to call these inscriptions fake but even if these are fake, it must be admitted that these were made 10 to 12 centuries ago. Hence these should be taken as proof that Brahmins did live in Bengal at that time.

During the rule of Adisura five Brahmins were brought to Bengal. No inscriptions of the reign of Adisura have been found, hence many scientific historians aver that there was no ruler by the name of Adisura. But society does not go by such rigid scientific standards. Whether or not Adisura ruled in Bengal, there is no reason to doubt that five Brahmins were once brought to Bengal and they eventually split into *Rarhi* and *Barendra* groups. But it

can be legitimately asked when did this happen? According to some old records, they came to Bengal in 732 A.D. There is no reason to doubt this, because at that time there was severe religious turmoil throughout India. Kumarila Bhatta was then trying to preach Vedic religion by writing a commentary on the Mimansa-Sutras. The great poet Bhavabhuti was his disciple. He was then the leader of the Kanauj Brahmins, and Kanauj was then the capital of a mighty Brahmin kingdom. So there is little wonder that some Brahmins from there had come to non-Brahmin Bengal to preach the Brahmanic religion. These Brahmins from Kanauj discovered that there were only seven hundred Brahmin families in Bengal but they were only Brahmins in name and had no knowledge about Vedic rites. There is no reason to doubt those statements, because we have already found from copper inscriptions that attempts were being made at that time to settle Brahmins in Bengal.

But seven hundred inactive Brahmin families and five active Brahmin families could not have constituted the entire Bengali people. Thus other faiths and religions had existed and these other religious groups must have had a large clientele. Hiuen Tsang, who had lived in India from 629 A.D. to 645 A.D. had written that more than a lakh of Buddhist monks lived in various Sanghas and Viharas of Bengal at that time. Besides, there were Jains and monks of other religions. (The lack of mention of Brahmins is significant). The Buddhist monks did not earn their living; they lived on alms. If they got something from three homes, they were not to go to a fourth home. Besides, they would not visit a home for a second time until one month after they had received alms from there. These were rules which regulated their lives. Hence there had to be at least one hundred Buddhist homes to support one monk; so there must have been at least one crore (ten million) families who were Buddhist adherents to support one lakh (one hundred thousand) Buddhist monks. And that happened to exist in those days. Buddhism had in fact pervaded the whole of Bengal. Hence the Buddhists did not have any grudge against the handful of Brahmins. They (the Buddhists) could easily keep the people of other religions under domination.

There is no evidence when Buddhism spread through Bengal. But Bengal is very close to the place of origin of Buddhism. It therefore seems that Buddhism had spread to Bengal during the life-time of Buddha. On the day of his *nirvana,* Buddha himself had said "The prince of Bengal had arrived in Simhal (Sri Lanka today). My religion will be permanently established in Simhal." (Some scholars however doubt that Buddhism was carried to Sri Lanka by Bijoy Singha. They aver that this was done much later by Asoka's son).

So, not only had Buddhism spread to Bengal during the life-time of Buddha but Buddhist preachers also went to other countries from Bengal during this period.

There were two big towns in Bengal,Paundravardhan in the north and Tamralipti, in the south. The old name of Tamralipti was Damalipti which means it was a town of Tamilians. In order to stop his brother Bitasoka from fighting with him over the empire, Asoka made him a Buddhist monk and kept him imprisoned in a Buddhist *vihara* (monastery) in Paundravardhan. Thus it is evident that Buddhist monasteries had been in existence there from before. Tamralipti (modern Tamluk) was a major centre of Buddhists. (Excavations at Tamluk have brought out artefacts of the Mauryan age, the Northern black polished ware). It was from here that they used to go to different places for trade and spread of Buddhism. It was from this port that Asoka had sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka with the branch of the Bodhi tree. That branch, which was planted in Sri Lanka, has since grown into a huge tree. Thus some idea is available about how much had Buddhism grown in Bengal before the time of Hiuen Tsang.

The people, who lived in Bengal - the Kiratas, Paundras, Kaibartas, Banga, Bagadha - all had become Buddhists. But Buddhists never preached to those who killed animals for trade and living. Indeed only when they gave up animal killing were they given Buddhist education. Thus were born two caste groups of Kaibartas, *Hele* Kaibarta and *Jele* Kaibarta, *Hele,* derived from *hal,* that is plough, and *jele* derived from *jal,* that is fishing net.

The *hele* Kaibartas used to get Buddhist education but *jeles* did not. But only because they did not receive Buddhist education does not mean they were not Buddhists. One could become Buddhist just by reciting "Buddham Saranam gachhami, Dharmam Saranam gachhami, Sangham Saranam gachhami." The Buddhists could receive alms from them without educating them in Buddhist texts.

The ancestors of those who are now great admirers of Hinduism as well as of Brahmins, were also all Buddhists. The writers of many Buddhist texts now call themselves Kayasthas. Many who bear the surname 'Gupta' had written Buddhist texts. Among them was one Abhayakar Gupta who was a great pundit and a very powerful man during the reign of King Rampala. Many Guptas (like Subhakar Gupta) and Kars had written Buddhist texts. Yet Buddhists used to be very happy if they were able to convert a Brahmin because then it helped them get books written in Sanskrit. (This does not mean that Sanskrit had become the people's language, but only that Sanskrit had acquired a status symbol attached to it. In the late nineteenth century people were also as solicitous about things written in English when the majority could not read English).

In Nepal there are no unmarried Buddhist monks. There the *bhikkhus* (monks) get married, produce children and remain *bhikkhus* only in name. Yet if they got a Brahmin they used to make him a Buddhist *bhikku* with great pleasure. The reason was that Brahmin *bhikkhus* could speak and write well in good Sanskrit and correct grammar while the non-Brahmin Buddhists did not care about grammar nor could they speak good Sanskrit. These non-Brahmin Buddhists argued that they were mainly concerned with conveying the meaning and not bothered about grammatical correctness. But the number of Brahmin *bhikkhus* was quite small.

We also know that many oil-seed dealers, known as *Tilis,* had helped in spreading Buddhism and the trading community in general were known to be great patrons of Buddhism. They used to bear a lot of expenses of Buddhist *viharas,* paid for installation

of images, establishment of monasteries and got books written for the monasteries. Besides, the Pala kings were known to be Buddhists and great patrons of the religion. The small principalities under the Pala kings were Buddhist. But they also built Siva and Vishnu temples and made gifts of land to the Brahmins.

But how did gods and goddesses enter into Buddhist religion? In Ceylon (Sri Lanka) or Burma, gods and goddesses were not very prevalent. It was so in Bengal. As a matter of fact these gods and goddesses infiltrated into Buddhism through Mahayana Buddhism. In Mahayana, Buddha, Dharma and Prajna were transformed into *Prajna* (Transcendental wisdom), *Upaya* (that by which one reaches one's aim) and *Bodhisattva* (Personification of knowledge one who is on the way to the attainment of perfect knowledge). Thus Buddha became *Upaya,* Dharma became *Prajna* and Sangha became *Bodhisattva.* In time goddess *Prajna* became the energy (power) of Buddha because *Upaya* was masculine and *Prajna* was feminine. The two combined to create *Bodhisattva* . *Prajna* was inactive, devoid of passion; *Upaya* was also inactive and devoid of passions; so how could creativity continue? A power was necessary with passion. *Bodhisattva* was conceived as that power. Hence *Bodhisattva* began to be worshipped more than Buddha or Dharma. What was the use of worshipping inactive idols devoid of passion; Thus, many *Bodhisattva* (gods) came into being of which the most important one was *Avalokiteswar.*

Be that as it may, one big problem surfaced with idol worshipping of Buddha. Henceforward worship of Buddha became mixed with Sakti. And so along with it came to be worshipped those idols and images which were erotic. In Tantra, the puja of Siva and Sakti is common and popular; thus in Buddhism, Buddha and his consort, Sakti, came into vogue and this came to be known as Tantric Buddhism. The rigour of earlier Buddhism was gone and the new form became popular. People were happy with the new easier way to *nirvana.*This cult also came to be known as *Sahajiya.*The explanation is that Lord Buddha is happy and content and restful in peace when he is in union with Sakti, the female

energy; so at that time he grants whatever is prayed for. It is then that he symbolises compassion and piety; so that is an appropriate moment for worshippers to pray. The man-woman image in Vaishnavism also has the same motivation. And this peaceful, easy form of puja gradually spread into other cults also, like Vaishnavism. The main difference between Buddhist Sahajiya and Vaishnava Sahajiya is that while the former is merely symbolic, the latter is based on the principle of *bhakti.*

It was when this Sahajiya cult of Mahayana Buddhism (which is in fact a later phase of Mahayana, known as Vajrayana) became dominant that the Khiljis came from Afghanistan, demolished all their monasteries and the erotic images of gods and goddesses, and killed large numbers of shaven-headed *bhikkhus* including many great pundits in the big *viharas*. With that the cult of Sahajiya Buddhism died.

Before the Muslim conquest, Ballal Sen (1158-1179 AD.) took a census of Rarhi and Barendra Brahmins. There were 350 families of Rarhi and 450 families of Barendra Brahmins. There were also a few *Satsati, Paschatya* and *Dakshinatya* Brahmins. The total number of Brahmin families at that time was around 2000. Until then the Brahmins carried on sharp intellectual arguments and dialogues with the Buddhist *bhikkhus* which is revealed in the large number of philosophical texts. When Buddhism was crushed by Muslim conquest, the Brahmins became dominant and their main intellectual confrontation began with the Muslim Fakirs and Maulavis. At that time, almost half of the Buddhists became converts to Islam and the rest accepted domination of the Brahmins. Those who tried to stay Buddhist were oppressed by Brahmins and Mussalmans together.

Those who remained Buddhist forgot the main philosophical tenets of Buddhism, became married priests and evolved a new cult of Buddhism. This came to be known as *Dharma Thakur* resembling a tortoise with four legs, an elongated neck and an oval-shaped top. The priests of *Dharma Thakur* are mainly the *Doms, Handis* and other lower castes. According to the legend in

Dharma Mangal Kavya when Lausen asked Kalu Roy (a Dom) to come to heaven with him, Kalu Roy asked him if he would get wine and pork there. Lausen said 'no'. Kalu Roy then replied he would not go to heaven. Lausen then authorised Kalu Dom to be a worshipper of *Dharma Thakur* and left. Since then the Doms became the priests of *Dharma Thakur*. And this rings down the curtain on Buddhism in Bengal.

CHAPTER V

FROM THE ROMANTIC TO THE MODERN

Bengal had remained outside the pale of Vedic influence in the ancient days. There were even injunctions against visiting the Bengal region by the Vedic Aryans. Thus Bengalis had remained heretic in the eyes of the Vedic Brahmins and were known as Vratyas. Ancient Indian history mentions the place Gangaridae, a name originally given to the people living in the valley of the estuarine Ganges by the Greeks. The first contact of the vedic peoples with the Bengalis probably occured around the fourth century B.C. But it failed to bring the Bengalis under Vedic influence.

One of the early Hindu rulers, Ballal Sena (1160-1176) made vigorous efforts to demolish Buddhism, then popular in Bengal, and establish Brahmanism. He invited vedic Brahmins from other parts of India to come to Bengal and bestowed great favours on them. During the reign of Ballal Sena, and especially during that of his son Lakshman Sena, Brahmanism and Sanskrit literature flourished under court patronage. But Brahmanical influence remained limited and gradually succumbed to Tantricism to a large extent, which grew under its super-structure. The worship of deities hardly above the animistic stage was strongly entrenched in every village, over which the Brahmanic priests threw the mantle and sanction of Hinduism. Gods and goddeses of aboriginal origin, like Chandi, Manasa (the serpent goddess), Dakshin Rai (the tiger god) and many others came to be regarded as Hindu gods and goddesses and were able to get the acceptance and blessings of

the Brahmanic priests.

An earlier form of Tantricism was the dominant religion of this region. About the fourth century B.C. this was partly displaced and largely influenced by the Buddhist and Jain religions. Hiuen Tsang found Buddhism and Jainism flourishing when he visited Bengal in the seventh century A.D., and apparently they were popular here for a long time. However, Buddhism seems to have been the dominant religion in the area and remained so at least until the 12th century A.D., and perhaps as late as the sixteenth century.

During the last centuries of the Buddhist period, the Mahayana doctrine came under the influence of Tantra and evolved a system of thought or metaphysics which was neither Buddhist nor Vedic. The original transformation from Hinayana to Mahayana represented a popularisation of Buddhism, Mahayana, with its more liberal ideal of the final goal, could capture the minds of the people much more than Hinayana because of the latter's strict monastic and ethical rigorism (vide *Obscure Religious Cults* by Sashi Bhusan Das Gupta). This was further developed in the transition from Mahayana to Vajrayana. It is the Vajrayana doctrine which can be called Tantric Buddhism.

Out of the original teachings of Buddha emerged the notion that reality consists of two main principles known as *sunyata* (vacuity) and *karuna* (compassion). These were transformed under Tantric influence into *Prajna* (Transcendental wisdom) and Upaya (means to attain the aim), which in turn were identified with the male and female principles of nature. In the new interpretation, reality was construed as a drama in which these two principles interact.

From the original concept of *nirvana,* whether construed as the cessation of the continuous cycle of rebirth or as a state of tranquility, grew the concept of *mahasukha* (supreme bliss). It was understood to be the perfect experience which occurs when there is complete union of *prajna* and *upaya,* the male and female principles of nature and creation. The attainment of an absolute

state of supreme bliss was accepted to be the summum bonum of life by the Tantric Buddhists. And for the realisation of such a state of Supreme bliss they adopted a course of sexo-yogic practice. This conception of *mahasukha* is the central point round which all the esoteric practices of Tantric Buddhists grew and developed in Bengal (vide Sashi Bhusan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults, p.37).*

A religion of sexo-yogic practices fused with animistic beliefs thus developed in Bengal after Buddhism came under the influence of Tantra. The male and female principles later became identified as Siva and Sakti, and around the partisans of each developed the popular cults of Saivism and Saktaism in Bengal. The Sakta cult eventually became more popular. From the notion of activity as the female principle also came the identification of Kali as the goddess of power.

In Tantra great care is taken to emphasise that the worship of the goddess cannot be performed without having sexual inter-course. The Tantric text, *Gupta-samhita,* very candidly says that he is the lowest among men who does not have sexual intercourse with women when worshipping the goddess. Other Tantric texts also emphasize that a worshipper will not gain virtuous merit unless he sexually unites with a married woman (vide Dr. Atul Sur, *History and Culture of Bengal,* Calcutta 1963: p. 30). In one of the most celebrated tantric yogic systems, the man is required to go into meditation in sexual union with a woman (a married woman, not his wife), and that is supposed to give him the supreme control of cerebral functions.

Besides the Saiva and Sakta cults, another religious movement of Hindu origin was profoundly shaped by the Tantric concept of male and female principles. The male principle was identified as Krishna, the eternal lover, and the female principle as Radha, the eternal beloved. The drama of their eternal love-making symbolises the relation which every devotee should have with the Supreme God, Vishnu, one of whose incarnations is Krishna. From Vishnu comes the name of the cult, Vaishnavism,

and the name of the followers, the Vaishnavas. The earliest literary record of Vaishnavism in Bengal is Joydeva's *Gita Govinda* (12th Century A.D.) and its most popular poet exponent was Chandidas (late 14th and early 15th century A.D.)

Although some doubts have since been raised about Kenduli in Birbhum district being the birth-place of Joydeva or that Joydeva himself was a Vaishnava (vide *West Bengal District Gazetteers,* Birbhum, published by West Bengal Government, Calcutta, 1975; pp. 90-91) there is certainly no doubt that Chaitanya made his book, *Gita-Govinda,* the gospel of Gaudiya Vaishnava Bhakti-Dharma.

Gita-Govinda revolves round the theme of ecstatic love of Radha and Krishna. Dr. R.C. Majumdar writes :... "the great ideal of Radha and Krishna was in vogue in Bengal (even) before Chaitanya's time but it had lost its divine character and degenerated into a symbol of licentiousness. The *Gita-Govinda* of Joydeva had earned esteem all over the country, but the author portrayed in all its nakedness, a realistic picture of physical enjoyment such as would be considered indecent and hateful at the present time. The portrayal of the amorous sport of Radha and Krishna in the 12th chapter of the book would make a modern author liable for punishment..." One of the foremost critics of Vaishnava literature (Dr. Biman Behari Majumdar) has opined about Sri Krishna Kirtan of Chandidas that the 'erotic sentiment permeating the poem has reduced it to the class of pornography' (*History of Medieval Bengal*, Calcutta, 1973 p.201).

Chandidas, the great Bengali lyricist of Nanur, also in Birbhum district and a Sahajiya exponent, divined human love in his songs. In Bengali Vaishnavism, particularly in its Sahajiya form, *parakiya* love (love with the spouse of another person) was developed as distinct from the love depicted in the Puranas. Similar in some respects to both Hindu and Buddhist Tantricism, the Vaishnava Sahajiya movement, under strong influence of Tantric yoga, put stress on love and affirmed that all truth lay in the human body, equating divinity with man. While attributing divinity in

man, a theme which was theological speculation in the early phase of Vaishnavism, it gradually became a practice with the Vaishnava Sahajiyas taking its inspiration from the secret yogic control of sexual pleasure and transforming it into transcendental bliss.

The great revival of Vaishnavism in Bengal took place in the fifteenth century under the influence of Sri Chaitanya. Evidently, it derived much of its impetus as a popular movement in protest against the rigid Brahmanic control of social and religious life through imposition of a caste hierarchy. It cut across caste lines, and derived most of its strength from its teaching about the fundamental oneness of man in spirit. According to Vaishnavism, the highest value in life is attained at that moment when the devotee-beloved achieves mystical union with the deity-lover. And hence all Vaishnava devotees, men or women, place themselves in the position of Radha striving for union with Krishna. To those who seek this goal all earthly distinctions are inconsequential. The Sakta and the Vaishnava cults came to dominate the life of the Bengalis from the latter part of the fifteenth century and evolved within their cults various sexo-religious practices. An intense religious feud developed between these two popular cults and their adherents which dominated Bengali religious life in the subsequent period.

Early Tantricism taught that ultimate knowledge and truth can be attained through sharing in the drama of interaction between the male and female principles. Subsequent refinement of this notion led to the emphasis on love as the basic unifying force, and love came to be valued as more than just the unifying principle in Vaishnavism. The Vaishnava poetry and literature of Bengal repeatedly reflect the view that love is what makes life worthwhile, and this appeared to have gained greater strength later when people faced constant suffering, hardship and deprivation. Love and its association with spiritualism and mysticism helped sublimate the sorrows and afflictions of life to a higher plane of mysticism. This had profound impact on the Bengali mind and influenced their

emotional temperament. Romantic love thus became a dominant force in Bengali life largely because of this influence.

Vaishnavism had also made an impact on the Muslims. The Muslims were largely converts from the down-trodden Hindus of lower castes. The chief reasons for this large-scale conversion were: social persecution by the upper caste Hindus, the lure of social equality in Islamic brotherhood and the hope of a better and secure life as Muslims under Muslim rule. E.B. Havell, regarded as one of the ardent exponents of ancient Hindu culture has commented "Those who embraced Islam acquired all the rights of Mussalman citizen in the law courts, where the Quran and not Aryan law and custom decided dispute in all the cases. This method of proselytism was very effective among the lower castes and Hindus, especially those who suffered from the severity of Brahmanic law with regard to the 'impure' classes"*. Later however Muslim rule degenerated and became tyrannical. Vaishnavism then became popular and checked conversion into Islam by offering social equality within the broad canvas of the Hindu religion.

The administrative degeneration during later Muslim rule and consequent helplessness of the people brought about a feeling of social resignation. Vaishnavism and Sufism, which came very close to each other in this period, reflected the people's feeling of helplessness and provided the religious basis to sublimate earthly suffering into a mystical plane of love.

The socio-religious situation in India had reached its lowest ebb from this latter part of the 17th century. The country was then passing through a period of exhaustion, resulting from the gradual disintegration of the Moghul empire while sectarian religious feuds began to dominate the life of the people.

About this time, the Brahmanic code of Raghunandan came to dominate and regulate the life of the Hindus. As the

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**Aryan Rule in India* (E.B. Havell, George G. Harrap, London)

eminent nineteenth century scholar, Romesh Chandra Dutt (ICS) rightly commented, Raghunandan's commentary was "a later interpolation in Muslim times" because of the social degeneration and demoralisation that was disintegrating the society. Dutt also held that Raghunandan's code was not in conformity with ancient Hindu sastras. In fact, it is this code which introduced the injunction against sea travel by the Hindus, even though maritime activities had been one of the major commercial enterprises of the Bengalis in earlier periods. At the end of the 17th century, the intense caste feud and the tyrannical rule of the Muslim bureaucrats had given rise to an acute sense of frustration. insecurity and demoralisation which pervaded Bengali life. What remained and dominated the life of the people was a set of rituals and norms of social behaviour which came to be regarded as tradition and hence sacred; and violation of tradition eventually came to be regarded as the most heretical act.

This is the time and situation when the British first came to India and eventually established their rule. The following quotation from the fourth volume of Sir Jadunath Sarkar's *Fall of the Moghul Empire* aptly summarises the situation, following establishment of British administration.

"On our hopelessly decadent society the rational progressive spirit of Europe struck with irresistible force. First of all, an honest and efficient administration was imposed on the country and directed by a British agency to ensure peace and economic growth. Then, within one generation, the land began to recover from the plight of medieval theocratic rule. Education, literature, society, religion, man's handiwork and political life...all felt the reviving touch of the new impetus from the West. The dry bones of a stationary, oriental society began to stir under the wand of a heaven sent magician. It was truly a Renaissance, wider, deeper and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople".

Toward the end of the 18th century, and the beginning of the nineteenth, primarily because of the advent of the new

conquerors from the west and consequent impact of new ideas and opening up of new economic opportunities, a new class of people came into social prominence and assumed leadership of the society. A tremendous upsurge of social, intellectual and economic activity developed in Bengal; and thus the nineteenth century came to be widely referred to as the 'Bengal Renaissance'. Rammohun Roy, regarded as the high priest of this renaissance, launched a vigorous movement for the study of India's ancient philosophies and the need to re-orientate the life of the people on the basis of the teachings of these philosophies and the new knowledge which came from the west.

However Rammohun's journey across the seas to England and his agitation for the abolition of *suttee* (burning of widows on the pyres of their husbands) brought upon him the wrath of the orthodox Hindus. They resented these two heretical acts of Rammohun even though many of them had earlier collaborated with him for the revival of ancient Indian philosophies and the introduction of English education. These two acts of Rammohun were considered defiance of tradition and unpardonable heresy. Even Rammohun's own disciple and lieutenant, Bhabani Charan Banerjee (1787-1948) left him and launched a campaign against Rammohun's heresies and in defence of Hindu traditions. He was joined by Raja Radhakanta Dev (1784-1867) and others who started organising *dharma sabhas* (religious meetings) to combat Rammohun's heresies and his new reformist religious movement, the Brahmo Samaj.

The most significant feature of nineteenth century Bengal was the revitalisation of Bengali life and society resulting from this vigorous intellectual activity and debate, intensified by the conflict between the reformists and the traditionalists.

CHAPTER VI

ROOTS OF TRADITION

It is difficult to understand the complexities of thought and feeling, more so feeling, of the Bengalis before the full impact of English education was perceptible. The orthodox Hindu identity was limited to upper castes, each one of which was more aware of its own taboos than of the entire Hindu community.

Only two of the taboos were applicable to the entire community. These were travel by sea and eating beef. Rammohun Roy, by going to England, was the first to violate one taboo. Whether he would have made amends by undergoing *prayaschitta* is another matter. In any case his friend Dwarkanath Tagore did not, and even ventured on a second voyage. The taboo on sea travel had lost its hold in the city of Calcutta by about 1846. To argue that Roy and Tagore were Brahmos would be unreal, for neither of them had declared as such; they used to call themselves Brahmins. The Brahmo identity had not come into vogue till 1843.

Did Rammohun Roy or Dwarkanath Tagore violate the taboo on beef? Now the issue seems immaterial, but in the first half of the eighteenth century, allegations of beef eating, even once and not habitually, was the easiest way to damn a Hindu, especially a Brahmin. No positive evidence was required, and he would have to go through expiatory rites. Brahmins had worked their way to the top of the caste hierarchy both through the association with the cow and by being the sole custodians of the Vedas and other scriptures. The other castes were not permitted to study the scriptures, but every householder understood his responsibility

towards the cow. In the second century A.D. Brahmins obtained from the Sungas, the first Brahmin ruling dynasty, acceptance of the contention of the priesthood that it was the duty of the ruler to protect "the cow and the Brahmin". Subsequent dynasties, Vaishyas like Harshavardhana, or the later Rajputs, gave similar assurances, and the Moghuls followed the practice. The cow remained the main support of the Brahmins even under the British.

Pirali Brahmins, which the Tagores were, lived under a cloud, that of the smell of beef being cooked in a Muslim household having entered their nostrils! Even this involuntary "pollution" had lowered the ritual status of the Tagores, though the evidence was wholly circumstantial. The allegation was a means to secure the social boycott of the Tagores who worked for a Muslim potentate. Dwarkanath, coming from a family which had lost its ritual status on such a flimsy allegation, could not have risked further problems by eating beef. He did entertain people, mainly Europeans, who ate beef. Rammohun Roy did not entertain on Tagore's scale but he too mixed freely with Europeans and Muslims. The gaiety of the parties thrown by Roy and Tagore did excite the envy of those not so favourably placed or whose inhibitions would not permit emulating them.

Water presented another aspect of caste prejudices. There were some castes, not all of them high but in the "clean" category from whom water and cooked food were acceptable. A whole lot of castes lower in status, and Christians and Muslims were groups from whom neither water nor cooked food could be accepted. Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore both maintained two kitchens, one manned by Muslim and the other by Hindu cooks. This was enough for them to be ostracised. Worse was the domestic unhappiness the employment of Muslim cooks led to. Both men were virtually separated from their wives.

In regard to liquor, the Muslim attitude prevailed on the surface, abstinence, consumption in strict privacy, alone or with one or two intimate friends was permissible. Social life centred round the *hookah*, not drinks. Each carried his own mouthpiece,

which was plugged into the hookah to avoid contamination. One hookah could serve about four guests and half-a-dozen hookahs could suffice for a large party. The hubbub about drinking was largely confined to Dwarkanath's parties, described by a European guest who noticed many things but not the drinking. What struck the European eye was not the same as what struck the Indian eye.

The impression about drinking by the Derozians does not seem founded on facts. The subsequent incident in which Michael Madhusudan Dutta was involved seems to have been woven around the Derozians. At the party at Krishnamohan Banerjee's house only beer was consumed. The defiance, and it was not flagrant, the party being held at a home instead of a public place, related to the eating of beef.

English education was supposed to encourage renegacy if imparted to the young. Grown-ups had been learning English since 1774, but that was for earning a livelihood, and Hindu society condoned many transgressions for money-making. The Derozians were learning English, and through it a range of subjects, without any prospect of gain, for the official language remained Persian till 1837, almost six years after Derozio's death.

The other reference to drinking is again at a home, this time Derozio's, and again beer. Ham, unlike beef, was not prohibited to all castes. The point to be recalled is that there was this indulgence in or before 1831. Derozian drinking, if it happened at all, has been magnified out of all proportions, either as a lapse or as an act of defiance.

Even if Rammohun Roy or Dwarkanath Tagore drank or entertained guests to drinks, those who can be called Brahmos, in the strict sense, could not be blamed for either. Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) and his friends were not seeking to resist conversion to Christianity by being lax. On the other hand they wanted to set high ethical standards which could not be ridiculed by the missionaries. They were monotheists who eschewed idolatry. Otherwise they were Hindus of the castes they belonged to, and retained the caste links. Their position was similar to that

of a Vaishnava member in a family in which all others were Saivites, or of a lonely Saiva in a Vaishnava family.

Early Brahmos were anxious to retain links with the family and the caste. This anxiety was responsible for Ramram Basu (1757-1813) declining conversion to Christianity, as he told Carey. Debendranath Tagore did not flout caste rules. He did not encourage or even want intermarriage between members drawn from different castes. The position was similar to that among Goan Catholics, Brahmin converts maintaining their identity and status till recently, or Muslim Rajputs of the Punjab lording over Muslim Jats, and Bangladeshis. Though they condemned untouchability, the early Brahmos did not actively seek abolition of the caste system. That was the stance adopted by Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) when he founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 decried untouchability, but not the caste system. He also remained unconvinced till 1933 that lifting of restrictions on inter-dining and intermarriage were desirable.

Early Brahmo anxiety to avoid a break with the caste system went so far that while Brahmins and Kayasthas prayed together, the latter were to withdraw from the meeting when Vedic hymns were recited.

Madhusudan Dutta and his friends were not as restrained as the Brahmos and the Derozians. They ventured out for binges from homes to public places. Wilson's Hotel in Calcutta (now Great Eastern) was a favourite resort for drinking and eating beef. If their desire was to shock those who clung to taboos they succeeded. Madhusudan Dutta after an escapade in 1843, twelve years after Krishnamohan Banerjee's party at home, was disinherited, and had to seek refuge in Christianity, for in the Calcutta of those days it was hard to exist without a denominational label. This similarity in the early lives of the two groups had led to the telescoping of events, and the Derozians were accused or praised for exhibitionist drinking and beef eating as a step towards conversion to Christianity. The missionaries welcomed educated

converts but were not picking up drunks from the streets for conversion.

Five educated converts in the first half of the nineteenth century were all to distinguish themselves. Two of them were Brahmins (Krishnamohan Banerjee and Jnanendramohan Tagore), two others Kayasthas (Madhusudan Dutta and Gobindrachandra Dutt) and one was a Suvarna Banik (Lalbehari Day). Three of them became literary figures, and two had brief associations with politics.

On conversion Dutta was given the baptismal name of Michael, and whatever might have been the anger then, it is by that name that he is endearingly remembered today. Michael redeemed himself, his public drinking and beef eating and even his renegacy, by producing the earliest modern poetry in Bengali.

Possibly Michael's example served as an encouragement to other young people to indulge in drinking. It was not that the residents of the city were noted for abstinence. Earlier mention has been made of drinking in privacy., Other intoxicants, tolerated if not actually approved, were *bhang, ganja,* and opium. None of these betrayed the person who had taken any of the intoxicants by smell or unruly behaviour as alcohol did. These were not treated as very offensive.

Nor was any of these the basis of conviviality. So they had not attracted attention. Besides, drinking at parties or in public houses was associated with Europeans, who in the eyes of the population were Christians. Both Krishnamohan Banerjee and Michael Madhusudan Dutta became Christians after developments which began with drinking.

Yet Michael as the first recognised bohemian did attract students, in his time more numerous than they had been when Derozio had been alive. Drinking among young men had increased and in 1872 the Brahmo leader, Sivanath Sastri founded the Chhatra Parishad, a students' union, whose members had to pledge themselves to abstain from drinking. The Parishad was open to all

students, but Brahmos joined it in larger numbers than young men of other denominations. The pledge had currency till 1923, four years after Sastri died.

Rajnarain Bose (1826-1899), maternal grandfather of Aurobindo Ghosh, educated at Hindoo College, wrote in his autobiography that the generation before his was not as addicted to drinks. Its vice was whore-hounding. His own generation found drinks and beef entertaining enough. In 1844 his father sprung a surprise on him by giving him two glasses of sherry and a meal of Muslim cooked *polao, kalia and kofta.*[1].

Pedigree Brahmins (Kulin) could have a multiplicity of wives, in one authentic case 107, not in succession, for few could be as long lived, but at the same time. Like the proverbial sailor having a woman in each port, the Kulin Brahmin could have a wife in each village on the route of his perambulations. He didn't have to support any of them, for Brahmins, males, had to be supported. At each wife's place the Brahmin received cash and gifts for a night's stay as though she were a client. In such a situation, a slash-and burn feminism would have been the order of the day but no woman leader appeared, and had not appeared till the end of the 19th century. Some men took upon themselves the task, but none made this his life's work, except Iswarchandra Bandopadhyaya, better known as Vidyasagar (1820-1891). Developments in the nineteenth century were not viewed as a feminist struggle, or even as a process of female emancipation, but as social reform.

In reality the controversies were facets of the struggle of modernity against tradition, of human feelings against the cruel demands of custom, and of philosophy against religion. Of course, Hinduism did not recognise any conflict between philosophy and religion. During the nineteenth century the struggle was waged by successive groups such as the Derozians and the three schools of

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1.Rajnarain Bose, *Atmacharit,(*Calcutta, 6th ed., 1985, pp. 26-27)

Brahmos and individuals like Rammohun Roy, Akshaykumar Datta and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar.

The earliest instance of tradition, as expressed in custom being challenged, has not, however, received the attention it deserves. It occurred as early as 1756 when the British administration was not yet established and the only missionary about was the settlement chaplain enjoined not to concern himself with the natives. Raja Rajballav Sen (1698-1763), in seeking remarriage for his widowed child, was moved purely by filial feelings. But though he could keep the daughter away from the funeral pyre, remarriage involved another person and was a social affair. So he sought scriptural sanction, for a whispered tradition was current that remarriage was permissible under certain conditions. There is no mention of the *Parasara* hymn in accounts of the affair then, though it was to become the mainstay of legislation a century later, in Vidyasagar's campaign.

Rajballav Sen did find some priests who opined that widow remarriage was permissible. That was the start of fundamentalism resorting to earlier scriptures against later customary accretions, which was later to become a liberating force. In its first encounter with custom it failed, for Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray organised a counter-conference of pundits who were loud in decrying widow remarriage.

Krishnachandra Ray (1710-1782) was an important support for the Orientalist bias of the administration, which lasted till 1826. Warren Hastings's establishment of the Calcutta Madrassah and William Jones's Asiatic Society, and of the Sanskrit College at Benares, were the result of this bias. The Fort William College also displayed an excessive (from the point of view of modernisation) interest in matters Oriental. These institutions served the administration and Europe's Oriental Renaissance, but in due time petered out. The last achievements of the Asiatic Society were Prinsep's decipherment of the Brahmi script in 1837 and Cunningham's identification and inventory of Buddhist sites completed by 1855.

Both the Madrassah and the Sanskrit College in Calcutta (established later in 1824) were equipped with English classes to enable them to be instruments of modernisation. That was the hope of the Orientalists who had dominated the administration till 1820. But by 1855 it was clear that Maulvis and Pundits at those institutions had remained as disdainful of modern education as they had been at the start; the Maulvis all the more, because names such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Euclid occurred in their texts too. And those texts were compiled earlier than those in English, and antiquity is more respectable than modernity. That was the basis on which tradition was built.

CHAPTER VII

NINETEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

That Indian society had been lagging behind in the march of human progress and had laws and customs repugnant to human sensibility was first felt by a few, soon after the advent of the British in India, in the nineteenth century. The horrifying rites of *suttee,* the utter degradation of womanhood evident in *kulinism,* the prevention of widows from remarriage, the inability of the individual to act on his own judgement - all consequences of an authoritarian society which had infiltrated Bengali society as adjuncts of the north Indian Brahmanic system, were viewed by these few as repugnant. The injunctions of the Brahmanic social order and the consequences of later degenerate Muslim rule had reduced an entire people to such a state of morbidity that it not only did not feel the absence of freedom but, on the contrary, believed that obeying those injunctions was a virtue.

India's contact with the western world in the eighteenth century, when her social and intellectual life were at their lowest ebb, opened up a new chapter in her history. Europe had undergone a vast revolution in life and thought by the time her people came to India. The Renaissance had resurrected man in Europe from the bondage of God and religion and had given a new definition of man who was no longer a creature of fate and was capable of remaking himself. Once resurrected, man attempted to remake the society he lived in, closer to his desires and aspirations, and then the French Revolution established by law the rights of man based on equality and liberty. The industrial revolution opened up a new

horizon for the fulfilment of man's potentialities and new hopes for progress. It was the need of this industrial civilisation, which brought the western world in closer contact with India in the process of seeking new worlds in search of raw materials.

The impact of the west was not however felt in India until the beginning of the nineteenth century when English education was introduced. A few men, of whom Raja Rammohun Roy may be regarded as the foremost, saw and felt the limitations and backwardness of Indian society. It was he who first welcomed the advent of the English and their impact on the society and culture of India. Rammohun exposed the ills of Hindu society and tried to reform it. He was like a giant among men of his time and gave rude shocks to the then decadent Hindu society by exposing its repugnant rites and false concepts of human value miscalled spiritualism. He demanded with all his powers that its wrongs be set right and truths about it frankly told.

Rammohun, for the first time, demanded the abolition of *suttee,* criticised the idolatry of the Hindus and the caste system and urged the removal of the utter degradation of women and campaigned for the establishment of the rights of the individual to live and act according to his own judgement. The Brahmo Sabha that he established offered hopes for the achievement of his ideals. And it was also he who tried to unearth the lost philosophical traditions of ancient India, forgotten even by its own spiritual preceptors, the priestly class - the meaning of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the positive sciences. As a consequence, he had to leave his parental home twice for about eight years, and could not be in the forefront when the Hindu College was inaugurated, even though he was its main architect, because that would have invoked antagonism of the orthodox Hindus. Rammohun wanted the college so that Indians could get English education and not to be on the committee for the sake of his personal prestige. He had already incurred the wrath of the entire Hindu society by his reformist activities.

The establishment of the Hindu College in 1817 made English education available to Indians which furthered the movement for reform which he had initiated. A new class emerged, having access to wider reaches of knowledge through English and a growing section of the people felt the limitations and backwardness of Hindu society. They endeavoured to carry forward the movement for the liberation of Indians from the bondage of traditionalism and hidebound restrictions of the existing order.

Freedom of the individual to act according to the dictates of his own conscience was repugnant to the hierarchical Indian social order. Rigid and regressive social laws had also contributed to the degeneration of the society and its stagnation. That explains why when a handful of Englishmen established their rule over this country the common people were absolutely callous about it. They had been reduced to mere cogs in the wheel of the transcendental life cycle, the Hindu social conception through centuries. They were unconcerned about changes in the government in the absence of any feel for freedom or nationhood or of their own rights. The most destructive force in life is man's contempt for himself. The spiritualism of which Hindu culture boasted had ironically reduced man to that state of helplessness and morbidity. Only when man is convinced about his utter helplessness does a society slide into a state of poverty, ignorance and teleological authority.

The concept of freedom once born continued to grow despite opposition from orthodoxy; also because the new rebels had access to an alternative mode of living not dependent upon the traditional social system. That was made possible by the opening up of new channels of employment and security offered by the new rulers and access to English education.

After Rammohun, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) a Eurasian teacher of Hindu College, and his associates, followed up his work, and soon introduced new standards in life and thought, breaking away from traditional limitations. They advocated a thoroughly critical approach to social problems and a

rational outlook in life. This group, later known as "Philosophical Rebels" founded the "Academic Association". They drew their inspiration from the revolutionary tradition of France and the "Encyclopaedists". They too soon brought upon themselves the wrath of the Hindu society. Derozio was removed from the teachership of the Hindu College after a campaign mainly conducted by a Brahmin, named Brindaban Ghosal, on charges of spreading atheistic, anti-religious and anti-Hindu ideas. The growth of the movement of these radical intellectuals who came to be known as "Young Bengal", can be understood by one simple fact : when Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* was published, it was sold in Calcutta at a prohibitive price, but a Calcutta book seller could not cope with the demand for it.

The conflict between the rebels and the orthodoxy rose to a climax about this time. Raja Radhakanta Dev (1784-1867), the famous compiler of the Sanskrit dictionary, *Sabda-Kalpa-druma,* and the great philanthropist Matilall Seal took up the leadership of Hindu orthodoxy and started organising *dharma-sabhas* (religious meetings) in Calcutta. Vigorous advocacy of Hindu spiritualism was started by Bhabani Charan Banerjee (1787-1848) through a journal named *Chandrika.* The "Academic Association" group took up the challenge and started the journal, *Inquirer,* criticising the aggressive stance of Hindu orthodoxy. Krishnamohan Banerjee (1813-1885), who later became a Christian, Dakshina Ranjan Mukhopadhyaya (1814-1875) and many others faced persecution and were compelled to leave their homes because of their campaign for individual freedom and rational ideas.

When Rammohun Roy died in England, the only Indian speaker who spoke at his memorial meeting at the Town Hall in Calcutta in 1834 was Rasikkrishna Mullick (1810-1858), one of the editors of *Inquirer* and a leading spokesman of the "philosophical rebels". In 1838, these intellectual rebels brought out a Bengal monthly journal called *Jnananvesan* (Quest for Knowledge), as the organ of a new society formed by them,

"Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge". The life and intellectual activities of these pioneers of modernism in Bengal initiated a new awareness in the Bengali youth and opened a new chapter in Indian life.

The establishment of the Brahmo Sabha by Rammohun in 1828 created a new social organisation working for individual freedom out of the bondages of caste restrictions and religious orthodoxy. In 1829, after a relentless struggle by Rammohun, William Bentinck abolished *suttee* by decree. And in 1856, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's campaign for widow remarriage became a law. A memorandum signed by 50,000 people was submitted to the English Governor-General against this last enactment. Interestingly, when the Sepoy mutiny broke out in 1857, it was described by the orthodoxy in Calcutta as a calamity caused by this heretical Widow Remarriage Bill while the modernists ignored what came to be called the first Indian war of independence.

Rammohun's was the first revolt in the entire history of India to liberate the individual from the authoritarianism of a rigid social order. Brihaspati and the whole host of Carvakists had preached their revolt against Vedic ritualism in forests, donning ascetic robes. Buddha's revolt had been confined to his monasteries until, after Buddha's death, his teachings came to be regarded as a philosophy of world negation, sacrificing the richness of life for the attainment of *nirvana,* which eventually came to signify a mystical entity, and later merged in the orthodox belief of life after death. The Carvakists and the Buddhists did not concern themselves with the establishment of the rights and dignity of the individual in society.

Rammohun was concerned with life as it existed in society and his revolt was to liberate the social man, distinct from the recluse, so that ordinary people could live as they wanted to. His values were concerned with the individual in his present life and not beyond; and thus he marked a total departure from the orthodox Hindu tradition and authority. The foundation of the Brahmo Sabha signified a change in which a free and moral life could be lived in

the ordinary course of *grihasthya* (family) life and not in *bairagya* (renunciation).

The vigilance that characterised the earlier rebels however declined after 1860, partly because a certain level of modernisation and progress had been achieved. After the failure of the 1857 uprising, the British also decided not to carry out any reform in Indian society. The era of social reform thus lacked the support. Thereafter progress became identified with personal advancement and opportunities for personal advancement were opened up in the civil services and in the professions. Besides, the social purpose having been partially achieved, the new English-educated Bengali elite also looked to careers in the civil service and in the professions. The later English-educated intelligentsia thus lost the vigour, quality and sincerity necessary for continuing the struggle against the orthodoxy and the ills of society. Rammohun Roy, who had campaigned to ban the burning of widows and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who had obtained legislative sanction for widows to remarry, became rather hazy figures. Their achievements were remembered, but their spirit and motivations were lost. The Brahmo Samaj, torn by internal strife, also lost its libertarian significance. Those who took up Christianity as an alternative way of life cut themselves adrift from the society itself, and lost their challenging purpose.

But Bengali society did not remain the same. The pioneers had already ushered in change and a whole new generation, a new elite, had grown up. Their modes of life were different from the rest of India and from the stagnant past. And along with it had developed a new sense of nationalism, an urge to participate in the government of the country, not by reviving a monarchy but in a representative government which would further the interests of the people. The realisation that the government of the country should not be left in the hands of the foreigners alone generated for the first time a new sense of nationalism, the like of which did not exist before. The Bengali elite also realised that the present

life-in-society had a significance and meaning for every individual and he ceased to be a mere cog in the wheel.

Even a cursory glance at the series of biographic studies of nineteenth century men of letters (published by the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad) would give an idea of how constructive the last century had been. Whether or not one agrees that Bengal went through a renaissance in the nineteenth century, or about the criterion of renaissance, there can be little controversy that the nineteenth century was the most creative period of thinking and writing in Bengal. And in this *Karma-yagna* (creative activity) the contribution of those who have so far been considered socially orthodox was no less than those who came to be regarded as the leaders of the Bengal renaissance. The contribution of those who were opposed to Rammohun, Derozio, and others were no less significant, especially in the field of literature, politics and education.

Whereas Rammohun and his followers laid greater emphasis on the new social ideas of the west, the conservatives showed greater interest in educational upliftment and revival of ancient Indian learning. The remarkable contribution of nineteenth century Bengal lay in the totality of the achievements made by these two socially opposed groups which brought about a sense of purpose and dedication in the social and intellectual life of Bengal, engineering a radical departure from the social and cultural stagnation of the medieval period.

In the enthusiasm for progress and intoxicated by the ideas of renaissance, very little serious attempt has earlier been made to assess the contributions of the conservative Bengalis of the nineteenth century. One such person who can claim a distinct place in the history of nineteenth century Bengal is Bhabani Charan Banerjee who wrote the first satirical novel in the Bengali language, *Naba Babu Bilas* (The Amusements of the Modern Babu) in 1832. Commenting on Bhabani Charan, the reputed editor-critic, late Brojendranath Banerjee, wrote he has been forgotten because "he

could not keep pace with the times he lived in." Living in a time when giants like Raja Rammohun Roy were leading the movement for social reform in Bengal, Bhabani Charan, as the principal organiser of the *Dharma-Sabha* (Religious Society) took up the cause of Hindu orthodoxy and fought through the columns of the journal, *Sambad Samachar* that he edited until his death in 1848.

CHAPTER VIII

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES

When Calcutta started to grow into an urban centre, the Indian ruler was Aurangzeb, a strict Muslim, who is accused of bigotry because he pulled down two temples [1] and erected mosques on their sites with materials salvaged from the temples. Both the temples were far away from Calcutta and their demolition did not affect life around the city or anywhere in Bengal. Aurangzeb's notoriety for religious intolerance is based on his orthodoxy; unlike other Moghuls he discouraged music and painting and did not drink. He did pose for a portrait after the conquest of the principality of Bijapur in the Deccan, and as a prince courting a beautiful woman at Burhanpur, did at her behest raise a cup of wine to his lips, but it is said, when he did so, she relented and took it away from his hands.

His prolonged wars against the Marathas and the execution of a Sikh guru were in pursuit of imperial and not religious designs. Mirza Raja Jai Singh was Amirul Omraoh, the highest among the nobles; the honorific "Mirza" denoted that he was treated as a member of the royal family. Jai Singh, during his life, enjoyed a rank higher than that of Shaista Khan, who was Aurangzeb's maternal uncle. Aurangzeb's war against the Marathas resulted in the admission of a large number of Marathas, similar to the influx of Rajputs in Akbar's time.

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1. The Viswanath temple at Varanasi and the temple of Mathura

For all practical purposes the Moghul state was secular. Even prior to the Moghuls, the Sultanate had been defined by Balban as *Darulpanch* in preference to *Darulislam*, the area of refuge, and not of Islam. This definition has particular relevance in regard to conversions, which became the subject of controversy in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Neither the Sultans nor the Moghuls wanted converts, perhaps because as Muslims they would be exempt from the *jizia* and instead have claims on the Treasury during periods of individual or widespread distress. Conversions to Islam during the 700 years of the Sultanate and the Moghul Empire were overwhelmingly voluntary, through social intercourse and emulation or reaction to the stigma attached to particular groups in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Such conversion was widespread in areas where the contact with Muslims had been prolonged, in Afghanistan, Sind and the Punjab, or where the caste system had been imposed rigidly against popular will as in Bengal.

Imposition of the caste system in Bengal was as recent as the eleventh century A.D. European travellers, Bernice or Tavernier, noticed that large-scale conversion to Islam was going on in the seventeenth century. Discriminated groups were seeking refuge in Islam, because superficially it had no caste system. It might be mentioned that in Sind conversion to Islam continued till the nineteenth century and among the upper castes and well-to-do people. Shaikhul Hind Mahmud and Obaidullah Sindhi were both converts. The former was an elder brother of Acharya J.B. Kripalani, who remained Hindu, and was a leading figure of the Indian nationalist movement. So were Mahmud and Obaidullah during World War 1.

The (English) East India Company had its trading centre in Bengal at Hugli a little before Shahjahan drove the Portuguese out from that place in 1632. During the Moghul action against the Portuguese the Roman Catholic Church at Bandel was destroyed, but the Dutch and the Armenian Churches at Chinsurah were not touched. Aurangzeb in 1660 permitted the rebuilding of the church at Bandel but the Portuguese were not allowed to come back. Their

offence had been the forcible conversion of Mughal subjects, overwhelmingly non-Muslim, to Christianity.

In order to understand the Moghul aversion to conversion to Christianity we have to go to the fifteenth century and the coming of the Portuguese. In spite of prolonged crusades Muslims did not hate the Christians (who to them were Ahl Kitab or the people of the Book or the Bible) as much as the European Christians hated the Muslims (who to them were heathens). It was different with Asian Christians, Syrians and Armenians. The latter were important groups in Moghul India, and an Armenian Christian, Bibi Miriam, was one of Akbar's queens, whose influence was responsible for the admiration that European paintings of the Nativity received at the Moghul court.

The Portuguese advent in India was pre-Moghul. Vasco da Gama landed on the Malabar coast thirty-three years before Babar won the first battle of Panipat. Goa became a Portuguese possession in 1510 and Hugli their trading centre in 1540. The latter event occurred during the reign of Sher Shah, who is remembered for many good acts but not tolerance in religious matters, for he claimed to be a Mahdi, tried by the Ulema. Even he did not shun the Portuguese as Christians.

Certain aspects of those distant centuries require investigation by sociologists. Several aboriginal chieftains, who were not even Hindus, claimed and were conceded Rajput caste status. Why did they not become Muslims as sections of weavers in Uttar Pradesh and Khatris in Punjab did? The weavers and Khatris had greater caste homogeneity, and produced reformers like Kabir and Nanak, who sought to cover the rift in caste solidarity caused by religious differences, by preaching the unity of all religions. No ready answers are available and if there were they would be wide of the mark.

One explanation for these developments is that coexistence in mutual exclusiveness was no longer adequate, especially after 1545, when Persian became the language of administration, down to the level of the *Patwari* recording titles to land and collecting

the rent. A large section of the population at various levels could communicate and develop social ties with each other across caste and religious frontiers. In Europe an analogous situation had led to religious wars, the Inquisition, persecution and subscription to Articles of faith laid out by Church or State.

Jahangir did not subscribe to his father's Din-i-Ilahi but had to imprison Sirhindi, who demanded an avowed Islamic bias on the part of the Moghul State. His eating of pork and drinking wine, to an extent greater than Babar's , were in flagrant violation of Islamic taboos. Changes in dress had occurred and the nobility dressed alike, irrespective of religion. Conviviality had increased and those whose social intercourse was no longer limited to kinsfolk and members of their own caste came to be addressed as Sahebs. Those called Saheb were groups in touch with the Moghuls such as Rajputs (Raja Saheb, Thakur Saheb and Babu Saheb). Another set of such people close to Moghuls and other Muslims, spread over a greater area and belonging to various castes, were the Rais in the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The honorific was, and is, spelt *Roy* in Bengal and *Rao* in the Deccan.

Shahjahan on his accession to the throne had to deal with social intercourse and conviviality leading to intermarriages, threatening mutual exclusiveness. He issued a directive to the Qazis not to recognize such marriages which gave rise to the adage still current, "Mian bibi razi to kya kare Qazi", meaning that the Qazi could do little when man and woman were agreed to living together. The courts however could deny inheritance rights to the progeny of such marriages even which could be circumvented through settlements for life or gifts.

The Portuguese, through forcible conversions, had violated this tolerant atmosphere. Their expulsion had taught the Dutch, the French and the English to refrain from proselytisation, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries none of them attempted to make converts in Bengal. There was, however, some missionary activity in the South by both Roman Catholics and Protestants because Moghul authority there was weak. The English

Company did not permit missionaries in its territories till 1813. Chaplains looked after British troops and residents and left the natives alone. Kiernander, who was the first missionary in Calcutta, looked after the Eurasians. Carey, Marshman and Ward, who came towards the close of the eighteenth century, though British nationals, resided in the Danish enclave of Serampore, for since 1759 the Danes had treated the spreading of Christianity as important as trade.

Bishop Heber was the first ecclesiastic to reside in Calcutta, permitted under pressure from Evangelists. He was visited by some leading Indians. Seeing that he did not live as simply as the Hindu sanyasis and Muslim fakirs they felt assured that he would not be able to make many converts and so represented no threat to either the Hindu or the Muslim religious establishments. The religious controversies of the nineteenth century came later and the English -knowing Indians were responsible for the heat, rather than the missionaries.

It is hard to believe an old story that the English on their first arrival at Calcutta met a washerman, Ratan Sarkar, who could interpret for them to the local notables. But earlier Ralph Fitch noted that on his ship casting anchor off Masulipatam, some natives rowed out to it and conversed with the crew in English. That was more than a century before the landing at Calcutta and is still more incredible. More reliable is the story that some residents of the city learned English to enable them to brief lawyers after the Supreme Court was established in Calcutta in 1774.

Kiernander's free school was for Eurasians, but several schools came up later, where the children of well-to-do families paid for tuition. Two Tagores, (Dwarkanath and Prasanna) and Derozio attended those schools and became public figures in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their activities and the controversies surrounding them have been the staple of the Bengal Renaissance and subject of much writing. The missionary contribution to the religious debates of the nineteenth century was the criticism, some well-informed, and others prejudiced, of Hindu

practices. These were : a heavily populated pantheon, idol worship, the lingam as an icon, the eroticism associated with the frolics of Krishna and social practices such as burning of widows, child marriages and infanticide.

Theology was not particularly attractive to Hindus to the extent that some members of a family could worship Shiva and others Vishnu, be devotees of Rama or Krishna, without causing any unpleasantness as long as all of them observed the caste regulations, did not offend the taboos in regard to commensality, to articles of food, and to marriage. The emphasis was on social practices instead of on belief because the family, and not the individual, is the basic unit of Hindu polity. External observances, instead of conscience, constituted the essence of religious life for all householders. The sanyasi was different, but only a minority turned sanyasi even in old age, as traditionally desirable. The old determined and interfered, in the life of the family.

Social practices, instead of religious beliefs came under attack first, and from persons who had not benefited from English education. Rammohun Roy was appalled at the sight of his sister-in-law, an amiable and friendly member of the family, being burnt on her husband's funeral pyre. He was different from most of his contemporaries, in that he had a theological bent of mind and had read the scriptures of the major religions. He had come to two important conclusions, which were to influence much of the subsequent debate on religion. He held that all religions contained both falsehood and truth, and hence every adult should choose his beliefs and not merely follow those of the family he was born and had grown up in.

Though Rammohun is remembered mostly for his role in the enactment of a statutory prohibition of the burning of widows, his greater claim to being respected is that he was the first person in India to advocate an adoptive society in preference to the ascriptive that prevailed in his time and survives even today. He founded organisations which emphasised the role of conscience and were open to people belonging to all denominations. His

criticism of Hinduism led the Evangelists to expect that he would embrace Christianity. He did not, and the disappointed Christian missionaries accused him of being eclectic. He was closer to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, and the Bengal Renaissance dates from his activities between 1814 and 1829.

Christian missionaries were disappointed in another resident of Calcutta, Ramram Basu (1757-1813). He was close to William Carey who once asked him why he did not become a Christian when he found so much to his liking in Christianity. That was the mistake most over-zealous missionaries made. A formal change of religion would have cut off Ramram Basu from so many near and dear ones, unless like the patriarch he chose to order that his wife and children also adopt Christianity. No man of conscience would ride roughshod over the feelings of others.

Even so, there were some notable conversions to Christianity, of Krishnamohan Banerjee, Lalbehari Day and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. Each of them was disinherited and lost his patrimony, but made significant contributions to the Bengal Renaissance. None of them figured prominently in the religious debate, in spite of Banerjee and Day both being pastors. The question arises how young men from families, where learning Persian was the hallmark of education, could become renegades to Hinduism by learning English. The only plausible answer is that English being the medium for the receipt of the thought of Enlightenment, was more challenging than Persian and seemed more innovative. There was much less justification for associating English with Christianity than for a similar link between Persian and Islam.

Christian missionaries in the first instance addressed themselves to people like Ramram Basu and Rammohun Roy underscoring the uglier social practices prevailing among Hindus at the time, expecting that conversion to Christianity was the logical outcome of the dislike of those practices. Both Basu and Roy were better acquainted with Hinduism than the missionaries, and could see that identification of those practices with Hinduism

was not justified. Even before the Evangelist broadside was let loose people started questioning the propriety of the practices. Rajballav Sen (1698-1763) did so in 1756 and Rammohun in 1804, both unaided by missionaries. Ramram Basu in 1809 might have been affected by his closeness to Carey, but the conclusions he had reached were his own. Proselytizers are no respecters of individuality, for they wanted to entice or abduct members of one herd into another.

The missionaries failed with the educated but succeeded in annoying them by their criticism of Hinduism, which tried to make up for its lack of understanding by its stridency. It was in a situation like this that Debendranath Tagore took up the missionary challenge and founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1843. He claimed Rammohun Roy as the source of his inspiration, but the link is tenuous at its best. Debendranath's father, Dwarkanath, was a close friend of Rammohun and his active collaborator in the advocacy of Westernization, but put more faith in steam propulsion and traction than in religion, which he ignored as undeserving of effort at reform.

Brahmoism was a major force in the nineteenth century. It was more a moral than a religious movement, and its influence extended beyond its membership, for a large number of teachers in the district schools that came up after 1835 were Brahmos.

Syncretic ideologies and sectarian organisations are mutually contradictory. Rammohun had functioned through informal assemblies such as the Atmiya Sabha and Brahmo Sabha. Under pressure from Christian Evangelism and Hindu orthodoxy, Debendranath Tagore had to give formal shape to his movement to "resist conversion through reform" and name it Brahmo Samaj.

Brahmos were puritan in spirit and outlook. Literacy was universal among them. Every Brahmo student, all young people, went to school and had to sign a pledge to abstain from consumption of alcoholic drinks and from watching theatrical performances. These two were the principal amusements of the morally lax well-to-do, as well as the rebellious young Westernizers. The Brahmos

took care to avoid being dubbed profligates, for the orthodox had leveled such accusations against both Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore. The ban on drinks and the theatre continued well into the present century.

Rabindranath Tagore, son of the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, through his novel *Gora,* criticised Brahmo sectarianism, but either by design or accident the book was published after the death of his father Debendranath. Brahmo temperance, abstinence from rituals, emphasis on morality, and manners of polite speech were viewed as paragons of virtue. They suffered near ostracism, being considered half-Christian, and their isolation in their own city had increased with each passing decade, for the influx from the villages was increasing. The community survived by the skin of their teeth through their contributions to the Bengal Renaissance and public life.

CHAPTER IX

COMPOSITE CULTURE

For fairly long periods, large tracts of India were ruled by Brahmin dynasties but the patrons in the main were other groups, generally assigned Kshatriya status. The Gupta emperors and numerous Rajput princelings were among the patrons of the Brahmins. They gave the priestly class both respect and sustenance but ultimate authority was secular. The Brahmins were never organized in anything like a church, and the conflict between them and the State remained only implicit. It is made explicit in the Parasuram myth, the axe-man who is supposed to have largely exterminated the Kshatriyas and in the story of how the Mahabharata came to be narrated. Neither of them can yet be assigned specific dates.

The clients belonged to various castes - kinsmen of rulers, farmers, traders, herdsmen and artisans. None of them had authority but their contributions kept Brahmin families in reasonable comfort without having to engage in manual labour.

Many compromises must have been reached with both patrons and clients, and also with Muslim rulers (when they arrived on the scene in the 13th century A.D.), who as a group could not be counted upon as patrons. Even patronage by individual Muslim kings of particular Brahmins was late in appearance. The earliest definite instances belong to the reign of Firoz Tughluk in the 14th century. They are more frequent in Akbar's reign in the 16th century and continued thereafter except for Aurangzeb's rule during the latter half of the 17th century.

Brahmins may not have received privileges as priests during the earlier centuries of Muslim rule but were employed in various capacities especially in the collection of revenue. They were also exempt from the *Jizia* (personal poll tax levied on non-Muslims), except during Aurangzeb's time.

From the 16th century, when Sher Shah ordered revenue records to be kept in Persian, Brahmins had been learning the language of the Muslim Court which by the end of the 17th century became the language of elite correspondence all over the country, except in the extreme south. Even at the court of the Maratha Peshwas, a Persian *Daftar* used to be maintained.

Other influences diluting the narrow Brahmin tradition were also present. The revolutionary group, that was formed in the beginning of the 20th century, contained Kayasthas like Aurobindo Ghose and Bhupendra Nath Dutta, and drew inspiration both from the Brahmin, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and the Kayastha, Swami Vivekananda. The advent of British rule had created a situation in which Brahmins and Kayasthas could be partners in an enterprise with the Brahmins only claiming and being conceded nominal hierarchical superiority in social life. Though this co-operation across the caste barrier became common in the 19th century it had originated earlier during Muslim rule, and created a Hindu elite (of Brahmins, Kayasthas, Vaidyas and Rajputs mainly) which in many fields - ideas, clothing, personal habits, style and vocations - shared a common composite culture with their Muslim counterparts.

The existence of this elite and its composite culture has often been denied its importance, but the modernization of India, however perfunctory and erratic, was the achievement of members of this elite responding to Western influences. But composite culture nationalism was still born in India. Its form was Perso - Islamic, even though Persia, Central Asia and Turkey the sources from which the culture could draw material for its renewal, were themselves lagging behind the times. European influence had to filter through Muslim sensibilities. Much was happening in Europe

but most of the seminal ideas of European Renaissance were rejected by the intervening Muslims and never reached India.

That the composite culture had reached a dead end was first realized by Mirza Abu Talib, who paid a short visit to Britain at the close of the 18th century. On return to Calcutta, he wrote an account of his journey and helped in the introduction in India of the concept of "progress". He also advocated the imitation of British institutions. Mirza Abu Talib (1752-1806) served as the Moghul Governor of Bengal and after retirement came to Calcutta and learned English. Soon after he travelled to England with the help of a Scottish friend. Returning to Calcutta, Abu Talib recounted his impressions in Persian in "The Travels of Mirza Abu Talib Khan" in which he noted "the energy and vitality of the English and "their faith in development, *progress* and evolution" (emphasis added).

The other person to come to the same realisation was the composite culture's best product, its sharpest mind and boldest thinker Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). He was a Brahmin who had received, as was customary in those days, an education in Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. He realised the negative influence of the ascriptive society on the composite culture, whose Hindu and Muslim members remained separate though participants in many joint activities. He attacked the ascriptive society, and contended that religious beliefs could not be inherited and every person on reaching maturity had to choose his own beliefs.

Rammohun's first book was in Persian, titled *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* (Gift to Monotheists) written around 1804, when he was in his early thirties. He pleaded for an adoptive society in preference to the prevailing ascriptive one. It might have shocked his contemporaries but did not have much influence on subsequent generations. The significant fact about the book is its resemblance in diction, style and manner of argument to Shah Waliyullah's writing. The composite culture was creating its own intellectual tradition, whose origins lay in the writings of Abul Fazl and Faizi

(in Akbar's time) and Dara Shukoh and several others in the middle of the 17th century.

Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), grandfather of the poet Rabindranath, and a friend of Rammohun, was another person to realize that the culture of the Indian elite could be revitalised only by drawing upon European thought. Dwarkanath also belonged to a "composite culture" family but had gone to a school in Calcutta which taught English boys, whereas Rammohun had to learn English as an adult.

Once however the limitations of the composite culture were realised, it was quickly discarded by both Rammohun and Dwarkanath. They opted instead for English education. The Islamic framework of the composite culture made it unsuitable for naturalization of European ideas because of its dependence upon religion. Yet a native root-stock was needed to graft those ideas for healthy growth. Rammohun turned to the Upanishads which seemed least cluttered by ritualism and medievalism and composite culture received a blow from which it never recovered, though many attempts were made to revive it.

Rammohun's earlier challenge to the ascriptive society was forgotten, and Indian society remained ascriptive - birth determines faith, language, dress and attitudes of a person. That was unfortunate. Introduction of English education led to the problem of identity, a problem which curiously had not arisen during 300 years of education in Persian. Did those receiving education in English remain Hindus or become something different? The problem was solved to an extent by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), himself of mixed descent, who stated that those receiving English education were Hindu by birth but European by education. Derozio's influence on a number of Bengali young men was great, and he became the leader of a movement which called itself Young Bengal, a name which was imitated in Turkey early in the twentieth century.

Rammohun, Dwarkanath and Derozio between them ushered into India the Enlightenment - deist but non-

denominational. Earlier, India had come near to being influenced by the European Renaissance but had to overcome three impediments. First, the want of a linguistic means of communication. This was removed by the introduction of English. Second, rejection of printing by the Indian literati. This too was removed by the cutting of Bengali types in the last quarter of the 18th century and by the introduction lithography for Urdu printing. The last was the Portuguese and later some Englishmen being bent upon securing converts to Christianity.

Evangelism was very much in the air after 1813, when the East India Company lifted its ban on missionaries preaching in its territories. Rammohun Roy who had wanted to modernise the culture of the elite and bring it closer to the practical ethics of the Europeans found friendly missionaries attacking him for not having become a Christian. Rammohun wanted the Enlightenment and not Christianity. There was acrimonious controversy whose echoes are heard even now. The Evangelists criticised Hinduism so as to make Hindus ashamed of it, hoping Hindus would then renounce their religion. Reformers among Hindus would then renounce their religion. Reformers among Hindus criticised particular aspects of Hindu society to secure social change. Their work was hampered greatly by Evangelical denunciations, which made Hindus sensitive to criticism, an attitude which persists to this day.

Rammohun did not found a new religion - only a society of deists who shunned some of the more objectionable customs and practices. Its organisation into a sect occurred later. The society founded in 1828 was called Brahmo Sabha. Dwarkanath was one of its sponsors. Derozio did not join it, but one of the leaders of Young Bengal did, some of them became Christians too. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) did not join it, not because that great social reformer wanted to remain a Hindu, but because he was an agnostic and refused to be a member of a deistic group.

All these remarkable people ushered in the Enlightenment. Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-1873) wrote

poetry and became Bengal's first humanist in the sense of drawing upon the Greek and Latin literary heritage in addition to Sanskrit and Persian. The early Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) was also a humanist. Krishnamohan Banerjee (1813-1885) compiled a Bengali encyclopaedia.

Meanwhile the feedback of Europe's Oriental Renaissance was being received. William Jones in 1783 had discovered Sanskrit's closeness to Greek, Latin and German. The idea was propagated that since the Indo-European languages belonged to the same linguistic family, their speakers belonged to the same ethnic family, the Aryans. On the other hand, speakers of Arabic were Semites, and most Indian Muslims were either converts from Hinduism or descended from Turkish invaders. The converts were from low-caste non-Aryan groups. The bulk of the Muslims were therefore linguistically and ideologically or ethnically outside the pale of Aryanism. The justification for a composite culture vanished.

The New Learning introduced in the 1820s and 1830s produced a number of scholars. They demonstrated proficiency in linguistic and historical research. They followed the methods of the Humanists and edited texts, leaving the field of sciences largely to European investigators. The editing of ancient texts and their publication created a resurgence of Hinduism. It was the first time that printed Hindu texts were being circulated. The composite culture and the Islamic period were dismissed as Medievalism, and the discovery of ancient Hindu texts was seen as having the same importance as the Renaissance discovery of Greek and Latin texts. But what later came to be called the Bengal Renaissance, which spilled over into other parts of India, was in part revivalist. Its period was after 1860, and closed the Enlightenment.

Revivalism became active after 1866 when Rajnaraian Bose (1826-1899)[1] organised the Hindu Mela. Rajnaraian Bose was a Brahmo. So were the Tagores, a composite culture family, but they participated in it. Nationalism, implicit in Waliyullah

and the 1804 declaration of India as fit for religious war against the British - and more explicitly put forth by Derozio in the first poem on Indian nationalism (in English) - came to be identified with Hindu nationalism.

The 1857 uprising was nationalist too in the fashion of the composite culture but it seemed to promote feudal interests and had exploited the religious taboos of both Hindus and Muslims. The active participants were Marathas, Muslims and upper caste Hindus of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The Bengali intelligentsia had not been affected by it. The rebels has reinstalled the reigning Moghul as Emperor though for years he had lived as a British pensioner with no authority outside his fort and shorn of his imperial titles and prerogatives. Its failure ruled out all possibilities of joint action by Hindus and Muslims. Henceforth the two had to seek their advancement separately in a British Indian empire, proclaimed formally in 1858.

Bengali Hindus were a rising class largely because of access to English education and European culture. They could not afford to be tied down to a past largely Muslim, which had already become redundant. While following the changes in the attitudes of this class it is necessary to bear in mind that after the failure of the 1857 uprising the British offered a pledge that no changes in Indian custom would be brought about. The era of social reform had ended, and Rammohun Roy (who had campaigned against burning of widows) and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (who had obtained legislative permission for widows to remarry) became rather hazy figures. Their achievements were remembered, their spirit and motivations were forgotten. Progress became identified with personal advancement.

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1. In 1866, Rajnaraian Bose (maternal grandfather of Aurobindo Ghosh) founded the *Society for the promotion of National Feeling* to uphold Hindu cultural heritage against the onslaught of Western culture and ideas. (See also Rabindranath Tagore - *Reminiscences*, Macmillan and Company, Indian Edition, 1966, p. 148)

Opportunities for personal advancement followed the failure of the 1857 uprising. The highest cadre in the bureaucracy became open to talent, and Indians were allowed to compete. In 1861 the first Indian, a Tagore and elder brother of Rabindranath, entered the Indian Civil Service. Henceforth the educated Bengali elite looked to careers in the Civil Service (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had joined in a slightly lower cadre) and the liberal professions. It was a small class whose needs could be met in spite of the racial exclusiveness of the British bureaucracy.

"As early as 1817 the Hindus of Calcutta were so enthusiastic for the new learning that they founded the Hindoo College at their own expense. In 1823 when the (East India) Company opened a College (the Sanskrit College) to teach traditional studies, some Bengalis urged that European science and the English language should be taught there. By now there was undoubtedly a strong demand for English education" (Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism,* Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. 17).

For example, Rev. Lalbehari Day was brought from Burdwan to Calcutta because his father could see that for gaining a decent livelihood, knowledge of the English language was absolutely necessary.

Still the intellectual ferment of the 1820s and 1830s could not be quietened. It found expression in religious movements - not social reform by legislation, but individual improvement through religious motivation. Debendranath Tagore was the first, who rejected his father's westernization, objected to Christian Evangelism and gave formal shape to the Brahmo Samaj.

One of Debendranath's younger associates conceived of himself as a religious reformer not confined to Bengalis, Hindus or Indians. He took a Messianic role, and while incorporating much of Christianity in Brahmo thought and practice, also wanted to reduce the social gap between his people and the English rulers. He preached that all religions had arisen in Asia, and that Asia was more spiritual while Europe was materialistic. The idea was

not original, some minor European thinkers had dropped hints to that effect. Keshubchandra Sen, however preached it with vigour.

Followers of Keshub Sen were shocked when he arranged the marriage in 1878 of his daughter, barely 12 years of age, to the ruling prince of Cooch Behar. This was the first important inter-caste marriage, and could and did, set a precedent. Since the time of Rammohun Roy, Brahmos had frowned on the caste system, but marriages had continued to be within the caste. Brahmos had equally opposed child marriage and Keshub Sen's critics found his action inconsistent. A group broke away from Sen and founded a new Brahmo group. Its important leader was Sivanath Sastri (1847-1919).

The caste system is concerned with ritual behaviour not faith. In the same family each member can profess, privately though not secretly, a different Hindu faith but his public behaviour must not offend caste restrictions. Both Saktas and Vaishnavas can live together in the same family, and worship their respective deities, but neither can break a food taboo or marry outside the endogamous circle prescribed by the caste tradition or within the prohibited circle that is within the same *gotra*. But since Rammohun formed his Atmiya Sabha thirteen years before the Brahmo Sabha, conscience had entered as the thin end of wedge in Hindu Bengali sensibility. The wedge continued to push, and many people by 1860 did believe that example was better than precept, and one had to act according to one's beliefs.

Instead of being caste representatives, the English-educated Bengalis wanted to be individuals, not conformists but normative. It was a change which created the field for a new kind of narrative prose - the novel. The form was imported or imitative of English novels, but would have failed if it had not made sense to a number of readers, and it could make sense only if the readers thought as the author did, that the characters were individuals, often involved in choosing actions in consonance with

the ideals they held, and not doing what was expected of them because of their station in life.

Bankim Chatterjee wrote a number of novels between 1864 and 1886. His characters were normative, and encouraged further individuation. His influence on the educated class was formative though he was not a Brahmo. He discovered enough intellectual and moral resources within Hinduism to enable a Bengali to be upright without having to seek refuge in either Brahmoism or Christianity. No longer had modernization to be overtly dramatic. Chatterjee found an answer to the quest begun by Rammohun, a native rootstock to graft modernisation on for healthy growth.

Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-86) found an answer to Keshab Sen's quest for a religion which combined the "best" in all religions. He was pious and his answer was to go forward through piety and avoid religious controversies. He successively went through the experiences of a Muslim and Christian and then reverted to Hinduism, not because it was "better" than the others but because its mores came to him naturally. All religions led to the same awareness of Divinity, he said . There remained no further scope for polemics.

Rammohun's Deism had raised God above religions, and while conceding that each religion contained a measure of great truth, Rammohun did not specify his preferences. Enthusiasm of his youth, which lingered on, inclined him toward Christianity. He did not abjure Hinduism but felt that much reform was needed to restore it to its fundamentals.

The solution reached by Ramakrishna was to separate faith from ritual, and to render faith a matter of personal experience. The quality of religious experience did not depend upon the dogma adhered to but the intensity of fervour of the devotee. The issue of professing the ancestral faith or substituting it by one of choice became personal, internalised within the man. It was an excellent solution as far as individuals were concerned. But it solved few social dilemmas.

Certain important social functions of religion remained untouched. That task was undertaken by his disciple, Narendra Nath Datta, who later became Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902). He took upon himself to provide Hinduism with ideals of charity and social service which had not been important in traditional society. He also provided it with an instrument for rendering charity and social service through the Ramakrishna Mission.The provocation for Vivekananda to turn to Ramakrishna Paramhansa and religion had probably come from an observation of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, that if God was benevolent, how did he let so many people suffer in famines.

By the time of his death in 1902, Vivekananda had rendered the Brahmo schism redundant. Rabindranath Tagore wrote the novel *Gora,* around a central character of Irish-Bengali parentage like Kipling's *Kim,* which is attributed as a tribute to Vivekananda's Irish disciple, Sister Nivedita, in which the disdainful attitudes towards each other of the Hindu and the Brahmo are shown as uncalled for.

Vivekananda had done more. Conversion to Christianity among the educated and the more sensitive went out of fashion. By his appearance in Chicago and a visit to Japan he invested India with a mission to reclaim the world for spirituality, and he sounded less eclectic than Keshub Sen.

Nineteenth century Bengal had thus become the scene of great intellectual, moral and spiritual ferment. The ferment which encompassed large numbers of educated people, belonging to at least two castes, without the intervention of priests, appealing often to history, not tradition, and directed towards good sense and reason, cutting out invocations to gods through rituals, weakened Brahmanism. Even Sanskrit did not remain an exclusive preserve of the Brahmins, nor could the reading of sacred texts be prohibited to other castes, after Europeans started translating and publishing the sacred texts.

Brahmins still had ritual functions to perform at weddings and other ceremonies, but they also worked as cooks and in

offices. There was tacit admission of their superiority but, by and large, rich landlords, civil servants, teachers, research scholars, writers, painters and politicians. They now enjoyed respect on merit, and not by birth in a caste.

This was true of Calcutta, and with educated groups in smaller towns. In the villages, the Brahmins enjoyed greater respect as a caste but they were also better off than the peasants.

Previously Brahmins had ignored developments outside their own traditions, but at the close of the 19th century the Bengali tradition had become heterogenous - heretics like the Brahmin Rammohun Roy (he was treated as a heretic in his own days), Brahmins who had lost ritual purity like the Tagores, Christians like Derozio, converts to Christianity like K.M. Banerjee and Madhusudan Dutta, Brahmin reformers like Vidyasagar, and Kayasthas like Vivekananda entered into its making.

The educated class was small. The leaders were known and accessible. Young men who read about them in newspapers, or heard them at meetings, could also call on them at their homes and converse with them. The communication might have been only in one direction - instructions being given to the young but the young were known to the leaders, and the young enjoyed a growing sense of importance.

Sivanath Sastri told the story of 19th century Bengal in a book [2] written around the life of a school teacher, Ramtonoo Lahiri. This became a repository of the tradition and was of great educational value. The main point of the book is the easy access that the school master had to his great contemporaries, and moral fervour of the people. Durga Mohan Das induced his friend to marry his widowed stepmother. People were ready to face criticism and even ridicule.

Bengali aspirations had diverged quite early from the feudal nationalism of upper India. The divergence however developed a logical corollary. It developed an element of

parochialism. Parochialism was unavoidable by a small elitist group which was proud of its modernism (when the rest of India had remained backward) and thought it had in its possession in English education a key to progress.

Yet there was a need to overcome parochialism. This it did by emphasising its Hindu character by its adherence to the Gita and some of the Upanishads, which were non-Bengali in origin, by asserting that the Gita and Upanishads provided it with a code of conduct which was as good as, if not superior to, that provided by the Bible. Emphasis on its Hindu component made the Bengali nationalist elite take pride in the achievements of Hindus.

The next stage in the evolution of Bengali nationalism was the assumption of leadership in the task of the regeneration of the nation, more Hindu in character than composite culture Indian. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was engrossed in the task and so was Vivekananda and the sentiment occurred frequently in the writings of Aurobindo Ghosh in the first decade of the present century, while leading the *Swadeshi* movement.

Lord Ronaldshay, who came to Bengal as Governor in 1918, visited Bengali revolutionaries in jail and interviewed them. In his book, *The Heart of Aryavarta* (Constable and Company, London) in 1925, he observed :

"....when the English came to Bengal the people of the land were decadent. They were a people whose vital spark had burned low ... The Swadeshi movement had come like a tempest ...Under its reviving influence they had steeped themselves once again in that stream of culture and civilisation which had been flowing perennially through the heart of Bengal ... The main problem for their consideration, therefore, was this - how to develop fully and adequately the newly awakened national life of Bengal" (pp. 99-100).

Bengali Hindu nationalism was however more modern

in spirit and more contemporaneous than the composite culture's feudal nationalism.

This was the broad picture of the period but some individuals did make efforts in the direction of naturalising in India the secular culture of Europe. Henry Derozio was the pioneer in this direction, and induced his pupils read Tom Paine's *Age of Reason.* He met with hostility from both Christians and Hindus.

Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore, in spite of involvement in matters religious, did contribute to the start of a secular culture which had its origin in Europe. Rammohun's contribution was the introduction of English education, Dwarkanath's move, in promoting in Calcutta the 'aesthetic' life associated with European cities.

Two men who followed them and often worked together sought to create a Bengali culture universal in content. They were Michael Madhusudhan Dutta and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. The early Bankim Chatterjee too made contributions but by 1880 the ebb had set in. European culture was rejected as materialistic and Hindu culture praised as spiritual.

The material aspects of the culture (railway and electricity) were European, the spiritual aspects were Hindu. The two stood apart from each other. Whereas previously there was a desire to absorb modern scientific knowledge, in the 1880s began a movement which Rabindranath Tagore described as a "curious attempt by Hindu orthodoxy to revive its prestige with the help of Western Science".

It was not only science toward which the Bengali elite's attitude underwent a change. There was also a change in the attitude towards English language and literature which constituted this elite's chief means of communication with the global culture which was western.

Tagore reminiscing in 1911-12 wrote: "When on one occasion some new connection by marriage wrote my father an

English letter, it was promptly returned to the writer".[3] The man who sent back the letter was the son of Dwarkanath Tagore, who had patronised the English language theatre in Calcutta and had sought to transplant a bit of European culture in his city, and the poet who approvingly recounted the incident was Dwarkanath's grandson.

It is necessary to quote Rabindranath again. Writing about Rajnarain Bose, a Brahmo, who in 1867 promoted the major revivalist organisation, the Hindu Mela, the poet wrote : "He had been a favourite pupil of Richardson and brought up in an atmosphere of English learning, nevertheless he flung aside all obstacles due to this early habit and gave himself up lovingly and devotedly to Bengali literature".[4]

There was however a marked difference between Rajnarain's adoption of Bengali for expression of his ideas and that of Michael Madhusudhan Dutta. The latter was a cosmopolite who looked to European classics for inspiration and argued for Bengali writing on even Islamic topics. Rajnarain Bose devoted himself to writing in defence of Hinduism, to an organisation for the defence of Hindus and even for protection of cows. He was an exponent of Hindu Bengali nationalism.

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3. Rabindranath Tagore - *Reminiscences,* Macmillian (first published in July, 1917), Indian Edition, 1966; p. 140.

4. *ibid*, p. 148

CHAPTER X

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS

In the opening years of the nineteenth century, ideas acquired a role in the life of the Bengalis which is still there. Before that the preoccupations were with making money, and that too quickly, for fear of Portuguese piracy on the Hooghly estuary, or of Dutch and French attacks by sea, or of Maratha and Moghul inroads by land. All the important people had come to Calcutta from elsewhere: the English across the seas, the Armenians overland, and Indians from villages and towns both near and distant. Only the Setts and Basaks had been in Sutanati and Govindapur long enough to identify themselves with the growing city, Calcutta.

Rammohun Roy did not at first admit of the rival pulls of religion and philosophy. Hindu thought does not concede the distinction between religion and philosophy, whereas in Islam between the eighth and twelfth centuries the incompatibility between the two had been felt acutely. That could have been due to the fact that philosophy was Greek, while religion was Arab and Semite. Modern European civilization draws on the same two sources, Greek and Judaic, and spends considerable energy on glossing over the incompatibility.

Among the problems that Rammohun Roy faced, the priority belonged to social reform rather than to man's position in nature. To him and several other thinkers after him, till recently, religion, social reform and politics were so intermixed that philosophy received little attention. The most important issue before Rammohun was that of identity. Society in Calcutta, as

well as throughout the country, was ascriptive. Birth determined one's religion as well as one's ritual status. Change of religion invited accusations of apostasy while it was beyond the competence of an individual or group to change his or its caste and ritual status.

Caste identity was more difficult to obliterate. Yet before his departure from the country Rammohun saw to it that the trust deed of the first Brahmo temple, executed on January, 23, 1830, defined it as "a place of public meeting of all people without distinction."

Rammohun was a Vedantist, and hence retained the role of intuitive knowledge and revelation (he called it Divine Inspiration) in regard to those Upanishads he favoured, but in 1823 he gave evidence of having approved the thought of Empiricists, like Locke and Hume. At that late stage he put on record his reservations about Vedanta without breaking away from its tradition.

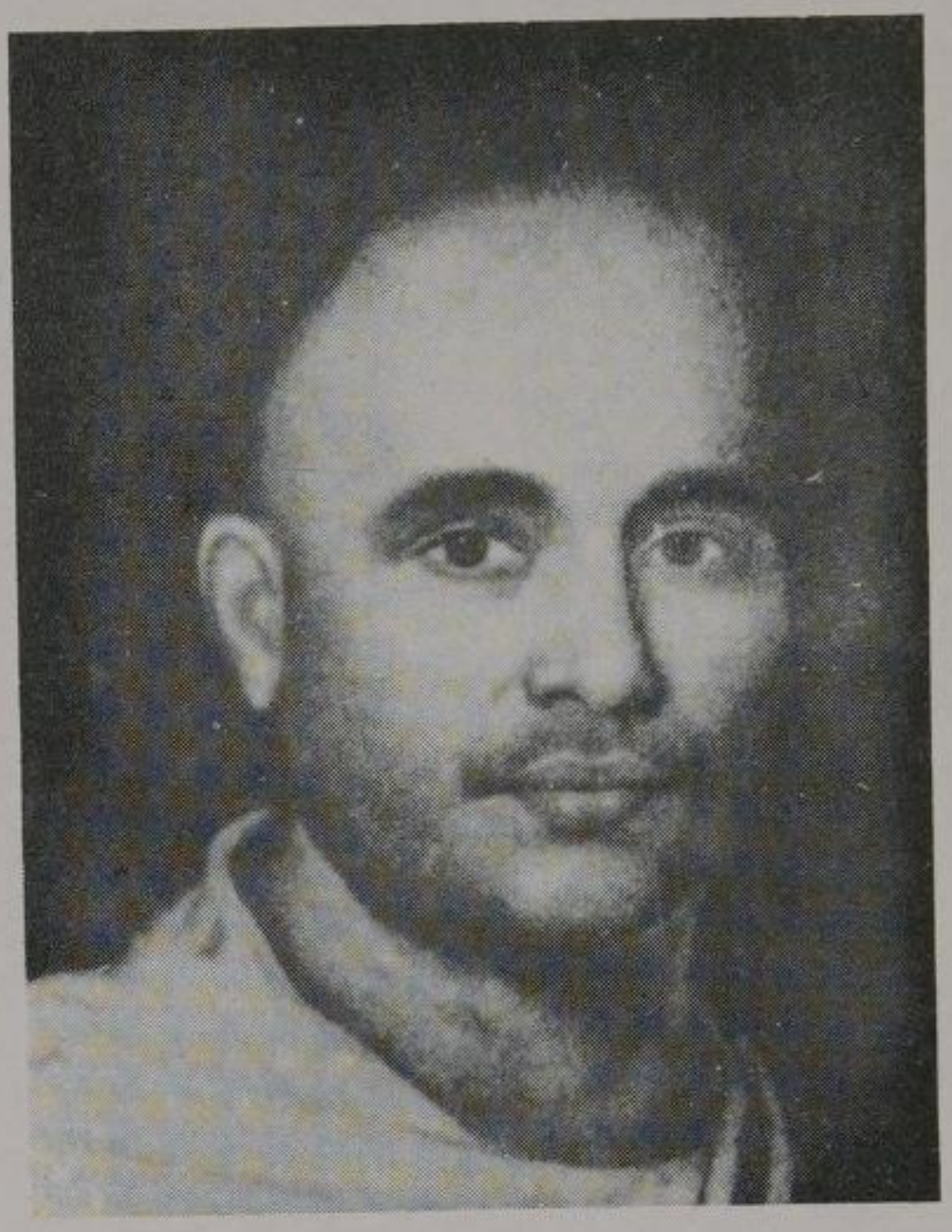
Derozians, active between 1830 and 1850, went over wholly to Empiricism. They numbered about 20, but none of them expounded their views at length to permit serious examination of their philosophy. They exulted in being rebellious young men, but Derozio furnished a definition of the identity of English-educated Calcuttans. Many in subsequent generations did feel that way, though they have often been derided as "Brown Englishmen".

Most outspokenly forthright of all in the last two centuries in the rejection of Indian schools of thought was Iswarchandra Vidyasagar in his 1853 letter to the Board of Education on the subject of what needed to be taught at the Sanskrit College. He proclaimed that truth could be double - one according to the Empiricists and the other in consonance with Vedanta, Sankhya and Nyaya. In the same letter he rejected the proposal to teach his pupils Berkeley's Idealism.

Vidyasagar was different from most other Indian thinkers of his time or later. After the 1867 famine he disputed the contention that God was compassionate, for then He would not

Henry Louis Vivian Derozìo

Raja Rammohun Roy



Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar

Sivanath Sastri

have let so many people die because of the failure of the monsoon and for no fault of theirs!

For about forty years, that is from 1840 to 1880, Debendranath Tagore led that section of the elite which concerned itself with beliefs and ideas. He had reacted sharply to Christian proselytisation, then particularly active, and had revived the Brahmo movement which had lost its vigour after Rammohun's death in England. He had allowed caste distinctions to continue, even though he may not have approved of them. Debendranath was a Vedantist putting his trust in those Upanishads which Rammohun had recommended to Brahmos as satisfying the modern consciousness.

Akshaykumar Datta was a young member of the Brahmo Samaj who had impressed Debendranath Tagore by the sharpness of his intellect. Datta's persuasion induced Tagore and the Samaj to accept in 1850 a proposition that the Vedas were not infallible. Yet Tagore's belief in Divine Inspiration was not shaken, and listening to communication, which can be described as supernatural, ten years later he conferred the honorific of *Brahmabandhab*, on another young man, Keshubchandra Sen.

Keshubchandra Sen joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1857, after it had ceased to subscribe to the infallibility of the Vedas, and little could have been expected from his talks with Dayanand Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj. The latter upheld the infallibility of the Vedas, the hierarchy of castes and the worship of the cow. The schism in the Brahmo Samaj that Keshubchandra Sen led in 1865 disowned caste differences but in his vocabulary the word Arya or Aryan was emotively venerable.

As viewed by Keshubchandra Sen, the main source and sustenance of the Brahmo consciousness is the spirit and not the mind. In other words, belief enjoyed primacy over reason, religion over philosophy, and a Brahmo with all the influence of Western rationalism in him is still essentially a mystic and an idealist. The conception of a spiritual India pitted against a materialist West owes much to him.

We do not know if Akshaykumar Datta and Keshubchandra Sen were friends, but we know Vidyasagar was friendly towards Datta. It was a tolerant age, briefly, for ostracism faced by Rammohun and the Derozians had ended, and the persecution of the Brahmos had not begun. Ramakrishna looked with respect towards Debendranath Tagore, Vidyasagar and Keshubchandra Sen, and paid them visits.

From 1870 philosophy withdrew to a back seat leaving the front row to religious and later to political personalities. August Comte's Positivism had found adherents in men like Dwarkanath Mitter and Jogen Ghosh, who conversed in drawing rooms, while religious leaders like Keshubchandra Sen and Vivekananda or the politically inclined like Surendranath Banerjee and Aurobindo Ghosh, waxed eloquent before impressive gatherings.

Among the religious, Ramakrishna Paramhansa was an exception, being a pietist and by nature a retiring person. He earned the respect of Mahendralal Sircar whose interest in science should have occupied him elsewhere than in paying visits to Ramakrishna. The contribution of the saintly priest of Dakshineswar, that was Ramakrishna's vocation, was to reduce the acerbity of the polemics between the advocates of different religions. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, he had experimented with living for short periods as a Christian and a Muslim before reverting to Hinduism which he found most convenient because he was best acquainted with it.

Sensible as the plea was, implicit in it was a refutation of Rammohun's advocacy of an adoptive approach to religion. Since one was more at home in the set of beliefs one had grown up with, there was no need for appraising and adopting another set of beliefs. Ramakrishna's experiment came soon after the 1872 Civil Marriages Act which made obligatory on Brahmos, parties to an inter-caste marriage and re-marrying widow and spouse, to declare themselves as non-Hindu. Renouncing Hinduism implied giving up other kinship ties.

At least the incidence of more abhorrent practices, for which sanction of Hinduism was claimed or which were associated

with that religion, was declining. The burning of widows had been made a penal offence. The same was the case with infanticide. Child marriage was no longer rife among the educated. The need for a Hindu to be apologetic about his religion was lessening. The pantheon was still over- populated, and there were numerous and frequent worship of obscure deities. Rationally, the worship of one deity or many was the same. After Vivekananda's exposition of Hinduism at the World Congress of Religions at Chicago in 1893, there was a resurgence of confidence among Hindus.

The Industrial Revolution had touched Calcutta around the 1850s and accelerated the influx of people from smaller towns and villages. The city had been receiving residents from other towns and villages at least since 1710, but at a rate which permitted the absorption of the immigrants in the ways and thought prevailing in it. Acceleration of the rate made the immigrant a factor in the city's life. The immigrant had to shed some of the caste habits and prejudices, but in his turn moderated the departures from orthodoxy of his kinsmen and caste-men resident in the city. This interaction has been continuing since 1860.

Alongside, modernisation has exerted its pull in the other direction in a diminution in the hold that religion has on the citizen. These were the beginnings of scientific investigations and political activity. In a sense scientific investigation had begun with the foundation in 1784 of the Asiatic Society of Bengal followed by the laying out of the Botanical Garden (in Shibpur, Howrah) in 1787, the institution of the Botanical Survey in 1797, the Geological Survey in 1846 and the establishment of a Museum in 1814. These institutions served only European residents. Of course a few Indians, mostly Sanskritists, were associated with the researches of The Asiatic Society. These people helped Europe's discovery of India and Europe's Oriental Renaissance. The feedbacks of these developments started reaching Calcutta from 1860 onwards and strengthened religious revivalism and nationalism.

One aspect of the feedback from Europe was the interest evinced by the German idealists (Kant and his successors) in India's

speculative philosophy. That meant a revived interest in the Upanishads, and not only those found by Rammohun as satisfying to modern consciousness, but almost all of them. Vivekananda as a Vedantist found enthusiastic listeners in India as well as abroad. His success abroad led to further acclaim at home.

Interest in Positivism may be ascribed to three unrelated motivations. It was more recent than Empiricism and could be attractive on that account to those aspiring to distinction in a colonial city. Nascent nationalism would turn to any source other than the English for inspiration. Positivism had originated with a French thinker and it is known that one of its Calcutta pioneers took pride of having read the original French texts. Lastly, but probably of greater significance than the other two, was the fact that Positivism, through one of its British propagators, declared itself "capable of giving a reason for respecting Hindu social institutions", including the caste system.

Brahmos and Derozians, influenced by Empiricism, had been critical of Hindu social systems, especially the caste system. Positivism had set out to be respectful to the caste system and this was its attraction for some Calcuttans. The best known among them are Bhudeb Mukherjee and Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Neither of them joined the Positivist Society, though they had friends in it. It is because of the fringe association of these two that Positivism is remembered as a short-lived movement, for both Mukherjee and Chatterjee attained an eminence which eluded the leading lights of Positivism in India.

Mukherjee was an essayist who was respected for his erudition, but not as widely read as his younger friend and novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee. The 1880s was a decade of resurgent Hinduism as much as the fifties were of the influence of rationalism and the sixties of advancing Brahmoism. Vidyasagar and Akshaykumar Datta provided the setting for Michael Madhusudan Dutta's cosmopolitanism in the fifties. Keshubchandra Sen in the sixties told enthusiastic and appreciative audiences that India's

spirituality and Europe's science matched each other as the vital complementary components of the modern world.

The seventies had seen the preliminaries of a Hindu revival in the Hindu Melas, but the requisite intellectual vigour was available only in the eighties which provided nationalism with the energy it had so far lacked. Bhudeb Mukherjee and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee found their efforts supplemented by those of Vivekananda, till their achievements were dwarfed by the younger man's.

It will be worthwhile to notice the visit in 1882 of Madame Blavatsky and the founding of a branch of the Theosophical Society. That movement decried materialism and advocated spiritualism, even occultism. In regard to the latter two it extolled India as the home of spiritualism. Much of the Theosophist terminology was borrowed from Hinduism, or occult practices associated with Hinduism, or claimed to be so.

Indicative of the outlook of the decade is the fact that Theosophists as much as Positivists found acceptance for a while in Calcutta, even though Theosophy disfavoured some of the coarser expressions of the caste system such as untouchability. One of the ageing Derozians, Pearychand Mitra, became the President of the Calcutta Branch, and a relation of the Tagores, Mohinimohan Chatterjee, the Secretary. While the Positivists largely kept away from nationalism and political activities associated with it, the Theosophists had no inhibitions in this regard. They befriended A.O.Hume, the founder of the Indian National Congress, and their leading personality in the country, Annie Besant, presided over the 1917 session of the Congress held at Calcutta. She also founded the Indian Home Rule League, while W.C.Bonnerjee who presided at the first session of the Congress in 1885 was a member of the Positivist Society.

Peripheral Positivists like Bhudeb Mukherjee and Bankim-chandra Chatterjee have made more lasting contributions. Bhudeb Mukherjee was an advocate of Hindi, which the Arya Samaj in 1875 had adopted as the language of propagation. Hindi became

the language of the lower courts in the Central Province (now Madhya Pradesh) in 1882 and in Bihar in 1883. Mukherjee, then posted in Bihar, had some role in regard to the administration's acceptance of the demand. Chatterjee was at that time also posted in Bihar. Hindi became the national language of India in 1947.

Chatterjee provided a model for activist nationalists of a later generation with a model in his novel *Anandamath* published in 1882. A song in the novel occupies the position of the second national anthem now, but was the sole recipient of that honour between 1905 and 1947. The song was titled *Bande Mataram* and the title was a cry of defiance and a slogan of revolt during the struggle for freedom. Members of secret groups resorting to terrorism after the first partition of Bengal in 1905 are on record saying that speeches of Vivekananda and the novel *Anandamath* provided them with the ideology and inspiration.[1] Both Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Vivekananda were dead by 1905 when activist politics began.

Hinduism lacked organisation for succour to the sick, bereaved and the destitute or those struck by a natural calamity, or to impart education to the young. Opinions will differ in regard to whether or not Vivekananda found evidence of a compassionate God, but he did furnish Hinduism with an organisation similar to what the Christians had. It was and is named the Ramakrishna Mission.

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1. See M.N. Roy's *Memoirs*, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1956.

II

More schools of thought competed for adherents in the city in the second half of the nineteenth century than in the first. In the earlier part the Dharma Sabha represented conservatism and was pitched against the liberalism of the Brahmo Sabha. The former was led by the scion of a family, clerical-mercantile at the start, adopting feudal mores later, which had attained wealth through the association of its founder Munshi Nabakrishna Deb with Lord Clive and Warren Hastings. Radhakanta Deb (1784-1867) had been spurred on to organize the Dharma Sabha in opposition to the abolition of *suttee*, not to Rammohun's heretical ideas, though he abhorred association with Rammohun in the founding of the Hindoo College. His objection was to practices and not to ideas. That was roughly the Hindu approach.

From 1850 the conservative leadership devolved on Debendranath Tagore. Technically he was a Brahmo, but of that section which would not break with Hindu caste rules. In that year Debendranath had conceded that the Vedas were not infallible, but still clung to intuition as a source of right ideas, as exemplified in 1862 in his choice of Keshubchandra Sen as "Brahmabandhab". The demarcation line between Hindu and Brahmo was losing its sharpness, as borne out by participation of the leading Brahmo family, that of the Tagores, in the Hindu Melas of the seventies.

Not all the softening of attitudes was on the Brahmo side. Ramakrishna Paramhansa, humble as he was, called on Debendranath and Keshubchandra Sen, even on Vidyasagar. The visit to Vidyasagar ended with civilities and nothing else, though Vidyasagar, when told by Ramakrishna that he had come to the "sea" (sagar), replied: "Since you have come to the sea, take some salt water back with you." Ramakrishna did not stop at visits. He took up an idea underlying all Brahmo thinking from Rammohun to Keshubchandra Sen, that of the underlying unity of all religions which could lead to the combining of the good points of all. Ramakrishna experimented with living in succession as a follower

of each of the major religions. The finding of the experiment was that Ramakrishna was most comfortable being a Hindu, as he was at home with its mores. The inference to be drawn from the experiment was not that Hinduism was superior to all other religions, but that there was no need to switch over from one faith to another.

Evangelism had subsided, having won over only a few converts to Christianity. Debendranath had been moved to action by the conversion to Christianity in 1845 of a minor couple, Umeshchandra Sarkar (14) and his eleven-year-old wife. Conversion to Brahmoism was not massive either. The rate of conversion to Brahmoism increased after Keshubchandra Sen broke away with the Adi Brahmos over the continuance of the Hindu caste distinctions among converts.

Ramakrishna Paramhansa had come to Calcutta in 1855. At the time of enactment of the Civil Marriages Act, Ramakrishna was 36, and the purpose his "experiment" served was to emphasise to all those restive with Hinduism to remain with the religion they were born in. His disciple, Vivekananda (1863-1902), was to continue Ramakrishna's efforts, and at the World Congress of Religions at Chicago in 1893 he was able to secure for Hinduism a recognition which staved off attacks by Christian Evangelists and dissatisfied Hindus.

Meanwhile, on the Calcutta scene a man appeared who chafed at Hindu narrowness and "immorality" but did not take up the role of reformer, or even a thinker. Instead he devoted his labour probably a more apt description than genius - to poetry. Michael Madhusudan Dutta became a Christian in 1843 to escape the confines of Hindu society, ate beef and drank wine publicly and demonstratively, and turned into a hero Meghnad, brother of the arch-fiend Ravana in the epic, the Ramayana.

His effrontery did not invite excommunication, for already he had put himself out of the punitive reach of Hinduism. Its reach was weak in Calcutta. Although vengeance for breach of faith could be wreaked in villages, as had happened through social boycott in

the case of the father of a Derozian (Gobindachandra Basak), and was to happen later to Surendranath Banerjee, this could not happen in the city. Of course, Krishnamohan Banerjee had to find quarters in the cosmopolitan and more expensive area of the city to escape taunts of neighbours and Brahmos were often humiliated and assaulted in the 1870s. These incidents were sporadic and did not amount to sustained persecution.

Debendranath Tagore and Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the leaders of the new conservatism, were either too urbane or too reclusive to launch a campaign. Vidyasagar, the intellectual leader, saw Madhusudan Dutta as a pioneer of modern Bengali and encouraged him. Vidyasagar became the principal benefactor of Dutt in spite of observations in bad taste on Hindus in letters addressed to him by Dutta, with the words "though you are a Hindu". And Vidyasagar took no offence.

Madhusudan Dutta's main contribution as a poet and playwright was to broaden the outlook and sympathies of the Bengali reader and to induce him to see that interpretations other than the conventional were possible. Bengali was just achieving recognition as a literary language; the date usually assigned in 1855. Dutta introduced into it an awareness of Greek and Latin classics. He also made a plea for greater use of Muslim topics.

Dutta was cosmopolitan in more varied aspects of life than the religious, in which narrow field the contributions of Rammohun Roy, Keshubchandra Sen and Ramakrishna Paramhansa are greater. Bengali cosmopolitanism was to flower about thirty years after Dutt's death, but its seeds were sown by him through his literary work after 1855. The artist, to be specific, the writer, as a propagator of ideas, came to substitute for the religious and social reformer.

While Dutta was active writing plays and long poems, insulting his benefactor and shocking the comformists by his bohemian way of life, the feedback of Europe's Oriental texts and translations had begun with the founding of The Asiatic Society in 1784 (though some material had reached Europe earlier), and

the Germans, especially Idealist philosophers, began to study them. Being a dependency of Britain, Calcutta was bound to follow London in matters of the intellect. Traces of Empiricism and the Enlightenment can be discerned in Rammohun Roy and the Derozians.

August Comte had a correspondent in Jogendrachandra Ghosh before the French philosopher's death in 1857. Chronologically, though not in content, Positivism seemed an advance over Empiricism. Dwarkanath Mitter, one of the Calcutta Positivists, learned French to read Comte in the original rather than through translations into English, but the direction of the Calcutta (and Indian) Positivists was channelled through London, whence came three English Missionaries of the philosophy. Lobb, the first of them, came to teach at Presidency College in 1865, and Cotton, an administrator, was the last to leave the city in 1902.

Lobb set himself the task of providing a reason for respecting Hindu social institutions. It was too late to resuscitate *suttee* but the Positivists undertook to defend the caste system then being undermined by the Brahmo Samaj, as much by the Navavidhan as by the Sadharan factions. Multiplicity of deities as well as idolatry were irrelevant to Positivism, which based itself on advances in Science, though it took no notice of Darwin, whose theories had been outlined just before Comte's death.

Positivism did not win many adherents but two writers, Bhudeb Mukherjee and Bankimchandra Chatterjee, were influenced by it. The latter, being the first major writer of the novel in India, (translations of his books were the first novels in most of the subcontinent's languages) had greater influence. Between 1864 and 1877 Chatterjee continued Madhusudan Dutta's cosmopolitanism but later took on a more Hindu attitude. His last work was not a novel but an appreciation of the Gita or of *nishkam karma,* doing one's duty without expectation of reward.

Though there is no positive evidence of Chatterjee having been influenced by Edwin Arnold's *The Song Celestial,* as it is in the case of Mahatma Gandhi, the date of his piece on the Gita is

strongly suggestive of the source of his inspiration. Of the four men, who raised the Gita to the level of scriptures, only Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) read the English translation in England. Chatterjee was proficient enough in Sanskrit to have independently arrived at his appreciation.

Vivekananda was a Vedantist, who was provoked to turn to religion by Vidyasagar's observation after the famine of 1867 that God could not be merciful for having caused death to so many men, women and children. Normally Vidyasagar did not bother himself with Divinity, and the provocation for this utterance has not been traced. Rarely did he quote the scriptures and the shastras, except when he chanced upon one in support of the reforms he advocated. Whatever be the antecedents of the observation, it launched Vivekananda on the social service that Hinduism had not known before.

Little can be done by an individual in a situation created by a famine but there is considerable scope for charity or social service in everyday life. Charity was quite absent in Hindu life. The unfortunate and the poor were despised as paying for their sins in a previous birth - a corollary to the belief in the transmigration of the soul. The Ramakrishna Mission, which Vivekananda brought into being, named and organised on the model of its Christian counterparts, had a predecessor. In 1843 three Derozians (Kisorichand Mitra, Ramgopal Ghosh and Pearychand Mitra) combined with the atheist Akshaykumar Datta to form the Hindu Philanthropic Society. In spite of the support of a rich man like Ramgopal Ghosh the Society foundered. Traditionally charity was meant exclusively for the Brahmins.

About the time Bankimchandra Chatterjee was expounding the tenets of the Gita, yet another feedback of Europe's oriental renaissance reached India's shores in the shape of the Theosophical Society. Founded in New York in 1875, the Society shifted its head-quarters to Adyar near Madras and established the Central Hindu School at Benares, because many of its mystical ideas claimed Hinduism, Buddhism and Tantra as their source. Among

the postulates of Theosophy was that many findings of modern science were known to the ancient Hindus.

Flattering as it was to Hindu self-esteem, Theosophy won many adherents in the country, but not in Calcutta, where Hirendranath Datta became its important votary. Theosophy often referred to the Gita too.

The rise of the Gita to scriptural status was facilitated by its size and language. It was not as voluminous as the two epics and being in classical Sanskrit was easier to understand than the Vedas which were in an archaic language.

When the ideas of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (which had nothing to do with the Gita) and those of Vivekananda (which related to national resurgence and not Vedanta) were fused into the ideology of militant nationalism, has not been recorded. Probably it occurred in the opening years of the present century at the instance of Aurobindo Ghosh, who admired the Gita and was at the same time a Vedantist.

CHAPTER XI

THE DEROZIANS

After the English had established their rule in Bengal following the battle of Plassey, there was virtually no intellectual activity among Indians till Rammohun Roy published his monograph, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* (Gift to Monotheists) in Persian in 1804. The earlier Calcuttans had engaged only in money-making and building palatial houses. The first to engage himself in setting up as a grandee was Munshi Nabakrishna Deb, Clive's agent in 1757, who returned from Murshidabad after installation of Mir Jafar as the Nawab Nazim, bringing with him an unlimited amount of cash and jewellery as loot from the Murshidabad palace. Within a few months he built a magnificent hall for the worship of Durga in the autumn of that year, which he celebrated with great pomp. The intellectual activity and its impact began only after the introduction of English education in 1817, observed Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Sastri.

It was the Derozians who first started an intellectual movement free of all religious influences and set the style of serious and defiant approach to social issues, which was a feature of Calcutta's life till 1860, and has erupted ever since from time to time in the protests of youth.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), the preceptor of this movement), had his schooling at Dhurrumtolla Academy under a teacher named Drummond. The older man had a reputation among his friends as a philosopher, and passed it on to the pupil. In his turn Derozio interested twenty of his pupils

to view critically institutions and practices, and not accept them on the authority of tradition. One Derozian, Madhabchandra Mullick, however, shocked the entire Hindu community by publicly observing that "if there be anything under heaven that either I or my friends look upon with most abhorrence, it is Hinduism", (Letter to *Bengal Hurkaru,* October 3, 1831). Unfortunately the first object of their defiance was the taboo on beef, which they thought unreasonable, for it was an item in the diet of the Vedic rishis. Derozio, was born a Christian, and did not need to defy the taboo. All the Derozians, six of them Brahmins, eleven Kayasthas and three Suvarna Vaniks, were confronted with the taboo.

When Derozio was opening the minds of his pupils the caste identity was more important than the Hindu. Beef was a major offence to all castes, but such minor matters as receiving English education also raised questions of identity. The Orientalists (all British) doubted if young Bengalis receiving English education retained their old identity. It was an age in which societies were ascriptive, the British almost as much as the Indian.

Young Derozio, more a leader than a teacher, had to coin a definition of the identity of his pupils to silence their likely critics: they were Orientalists among the British and conservatives among the Hindus. Among the latter, however, the astronomer Varahamihira could be cited as preferring to learn Greek than remain ignorant. "Hindu by birth, European by education" was the identity that Derozio prescribed for his pupils. Macaulay was to borrow the idea four years after Derozio's death without acknowledging the debt, and alter it to "Indian by birth and English in taste". His epithet, "Brown Englishmen", became the butt of many jokes, some pleasant and others unkind.

Derozio and his student associates followed up the work of Rammohun Roy and soon set up new standards in life and thought, breaking away from traditional limitations.[1] This group, later known as "philosophical rebels", founded the Academic

Association in 1828, the same year that Rammohun founded the Brahmo Sabha, but drew inspiration from the revolutionary tradition of France and the Encyclopaedists, unlike Rammohun who drew inspiration from the Vedas and the Upanishads. The association met weekly, first at Derozio's house, and then at the garden house of Srikrishna Sinha, one of the Directors of the Hindoo College.[2] In 1830 Derozio's weekly lectures at Pataldanga (subsequently the site of the Hare School) used to be attended by about 150 young men, according to Alexander's East India Magazine of June 1831.

The same group later established the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge on February 20, 1838, with Tarachand Chakravarty as President.[3] By 1843 the society had 200 members and its transactions for the years 1840-43 were subsequently published in three volumes. Among the contributors were Krishnamohan Banerjee, Udaycharan Addy, Rajnarain Dev, Harachandra Ghosh, Gourmohan Das, Maheshchandra Dev, Gobindachandra Bysak, Pearychand Mitra and Prasannakumar Mitra. Between 1828 and 1843 the Derozians published several magazines to disseminate knowledge about the condition of the country and the science of politics. *The Pantheon, Jnananveshan, Hindu Pioneer* and *The Bengal Spectator* were these journals. While Krishnamohan Banerjee published the *Enquirer* and *Tarachand Chakravarty, The Quill. The Parthenon* was started on February 15, 1830, and *Jnananveshan* was published from 1831 to 1844.

The Derozians and their teacher occupy a place in the

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1. Krishnamohan Banerjee, editor of *Enquirer*, and fellow Derozians however regarded Rammohun's opinions as "vague" and "confused" (*Englishman*, June 1, 1834)
2. Srikrishna Sinha was a scion of the Jorasanko Singha family and an uncle of Kali Prasanna Sinha, who published the first Bengali Mahabharata, translated by Pandits supplied by Vidyasagar.
3. Debendranath Tagore, then a young man of 21, also joined this society as a member.

city's mythology disproportionate to their numbers, their defiance, the duration of their activity and what is known about them. The teacher by whose name the group is known died young in 1831, having taught at the Hindu College for only five years. The pupils who were attached to him were about twenty in number and after 1840 had to co-operate with those who had not known Derozio personally.

When others had to be accommodated the name adopted was the non-sectarian Young Bengal. Earlier the group had no formal name; members were called and have been referred to as Derozians by contemporaries and posterity.

Iswarchandra Vidyasagar was not one of Derozio's pupils, though he collaborated with some of them. Neither was Michael Madhusudan Dutta, though he was nearest to them in publicly defying the taboo on beef. Nor was Akshaykumar Datta, the atheist.

Ramtonoo Lahiri (1813-1898) was the longest living of the group, having been a revered member of the society till his death in 1898. Among Derozio's pupils was also Radhanath Sikdar (1813-1870), the first in the city to master modern mathematics and controversial, in spite of a weakness for beef, only among his seniors in the Survey of India. Ramgopal Ghosh (1815-1868) and Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee (1814-1878) were rich, contributing to public causes, with both money and active participation. Pearychand Mitra (1814-1883) wrote the first novel in Bengali, thereby starting an activity which has grown in both volume and influence.[4] Krishnamohan Banerjee (1813-1885) compiled the first encyclopaedia in Bengali and later became the President of the Indian Political Association, the immediate forerunner of the Indian National Congress.

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4. Pearychand Mitra's satirical novel, *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (in Bengali), was written in 1858 under the pseudonym, Tekchand Thakur.

Few careers were open to the Derozians or for that matter to English-educated Indians. The language used in law courts was Persian till 1835, a Moghul legacy, and after that Bengali or Hindustani. Most Derozians became teachers, Ramtonoo Lahiri being the most eminent. Though the Charter of 1833 had opened some opportunities in the civil services, most appointments were made only ten years later. Only Rasikkrishna Mullick, editor of the radical journal, *Jnananveshan*, was appointed Deputy Collector in 1837, but most others were appointed only in 1843. In the case of Rasikkrishna Mullick the action was taken to protect him from social persecution. He wrote to Sir Edward Ryan that his father was dead and he was under the guardianship of his uncle "who...(has) already threatened me to put me in chains under pretence of madness" for his unorthodox views. The orthodox Hindus were clearly on the warpath. They had been shaken by Rammohun's movement, which called for only moderate social reforms. The young radicals went a step further and sought to destroy the social fabric of orthodox Hinduism. In the case of other Derozians the action was treated as weaning them away from their "pranks". The English newspaper, *India Gazette,* however, criticised the young radicals for "unnecessarily running counter to the customs and institutions of native society" (October 21, 1831).

Identifiable among the "pranks" was Ramtonoo Lahiri's discarding of the sacred thread in 1841, which is now very common. There is no mention of drunkenness or even habitual drinking; most of the rich elders did so in the privacy of their homes. At least Dwarkanath Tagore gave lavish parties at which liquor flowed as freely as behoved the host's wealth and rank.

Social norms were those of the Muslims, who were not only partial to drinking but had romanticised it in much hedonistic verse since the thirteenth century. Treating Michael Madhusudan Dutta as a Derozian would be as wrong as thinking of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar as Dutta's drinking companion. The Pandit valued Dutta as a modernizer of Bengali verse, and the

three Derozians who held a reception for the poet did so for the same reason.[5]

Rejection of Hindu social practices and beliefs and their justification was the main cause for the orthodoxy's tirade against the Derozians, not just consumption of beef. It was not the charge against Derozio for which he was dismissed from the Hindoo College. Neither H.H. Wilson nor Ramkamal Sen accused Derozio of introducing his pupils to beef and alcohol. He was accused of inculcating in them *free thinking*, which was considered dangerous by conservatives, whether denominationally Christian or Hindu. The times were disturbing to the privileged. The threat of the French Revolution had been contained, but an epidemic of revolutions had swept over Europe in the 1830s.

Having adopted the identity of "European by education" the Derozians took an interest in the thought of and developments in that continent, which was uncomfortable to the conservatives. The Derozians had bought all copies of Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* that had reached Calcutta.

Later the original Derozians were joined by others like Shyamachurn Sirkar, Durgacharan Banerjee (father of Surendranath Banerjee), Kalachand Sett, Kristodas Pal and Digambar Mitter. The Derozian ideals of free thinking continued to be important between 1835 and 1860.

As Hindu society was constituted in 1830, Brahmins, Kayasthas and Banias could not eat together without offending caste rules. So inter-dining preceded beef-eating. Only three of the original Derozians became Christians (Krishnamohan Banerjee, Gobindachandra Dutt (father of the sisters Aru and Toru, the poets) and Maheshchandra Ghosh; two distinguished

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5. A reception was given to Michael Madhusudan Dutta at the residence of Gourdas Bysak after his return from Madras and publication of his book, *Captive Lady*. It was also attended amongst others by Kisorichand Mitra and Digambar Mitter, both Derozians.

themselves as Brahmos (Ramtonoo Lahiri and Sibchandra Deb), but the majority had no overt religious opinion; all of them put high value on morality and public service.

That the Vedic rishis took beef made little sense to the ordinary people, for only Brahmins were entitled to study the Vedas and not many of them did so. The 1829 prohibition of burning widows, for which too there was no Vedic sanction, had put the orthodox Hindus on the defensive. They felt threatened.

Krishnamohan Banerjee, a Brahmin, had to leave home and his neighbourhood, for having allowed his friends to eat beef in his house. He found refuge temporarily with another Derozian, and a Brahmin too, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee. One of Banerjee's friends in the feast at his home was Rasikkrishna Mullick. He too had to leave home but did not adopt any new religion. Neither did Sikdar. Banerjee wrote a play in English, *The Persecuted*, on the episode, and that was the start of a new tradition of appeal to people's reason. Michael Madhusudan Dutta was the last person forced to give up his religion for having taken beef. That was way back in 1843.

Dakshinaranjan's Derozian act was not a "prank" but a serious assault on custom, which he could carry through only because he was rich. He married for love, rare in those days, a widow, long before the Widow Remarriage Act was enacted, and outside his caste, which was not permissible.

Maharaja Tek Chand of Burdwan died in 1832, leaving behind a 12 year-old widow, Basantakumari. The circumstances under which the Derozian met the widow are unclear, but when Basantkumari was prevented by the Burdwan retainers from coming to Calcutta, Dakshinaranjan moved the court. She was able to come to Calcutta under government orders, and they were married under the British Civil Marriages Act, twenty years before the enactment of the Widow Remarriage Act and thirty-six years before the (Indian) Civil Marriages Act. One of the witnesses to the marriage was Gaurisankar Tarkabagis, popularly known as Gurgurey Bhatchaj, who was the first editor of the

Derozian journal, *Jnananveshan*, founded and published on June 18, 1831, by Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee.

Derozio had a dramatic life having been dismissed for what he taught his pupils. He left some poems and died young, at only 22 years of age. His critique of Kant was considered a very original philosophical tract. His poem, *The Greeks at Marathon,* published on the occasion of the victory of the Greeks over the Turks, infused patriotism in the hearts of his students, as Pearychand Mitra had observed. Dakshinaranjan had a romantic life, probably the most romantic in nineteenth century Calcutta. This aspect of his life has attracted less attention than the beef-eating of his friends, or the consumption of alcoholic beverages by Michael Madhusudan Dutta.

The inhibiting factor was that Basantakumari was the widow of one of the aristocratic families, whose jagir dated to the first fifteen years of the seventeenth century. Dakshinaranjan was rich and handsome. His mother came from the Tagore family who, though tainted as *pirali,* were one of the four oldest Brahmin families of Calcutta. His first wife had also been a Tagore.

Basantakumari's marriage to Dakshinaranjan was also inter-caste and inter-provincial, for she was a Khatri from the Punjab. Proscription of inter-caste marriage was as much a pillar of the caste system as the ban on members of different castes dining together at the same table.[6] Probably it was more offensive. The Derozian contribution in loosening the holds of both proscriptions is immense. Inter-caste dining increasingly became common in the city though normally beef was absent from the menu, and inter-caste marriage would no longer provoke ostracism or even hostility.

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6. In 1867-68, when Rajnarain Bose visited Dakshinaranjan in Lucknow, the latter told him proudly that his marriage was at once "a widow remarriage, an inter-caste marriage and a civil marriage. Where could one get a better social reformer?"(Rajnarain Bose, *Atmacharit* Calcutta,1962,p.75.)

Among Derozians, Dakshinaranjan had the most successful career. Even as a late entrant to the civil service, he rose to be Collector (of Revenue) in Calcutta, which post he resigned in 1851 on grounds of health, and served for short terms in the principality of Tripura and the Nizamat of Murshidabad, finally becoming the incumbent of the Taluqdari of Shankarpur near Rae Bareli in present-day Uttar Pradesh. He died in 1878, but Basantakumari lived till 1900, though she had been widowed only three years after the burning of widows had been banned, a reprieve of 68 years.

The daughter of this inter-caste and widow remarriage was acceptable to a Kanyakubja Shukul Brahmin, who inherited the taluqdari and the historical and sociological importance of the most important Derozian achievement. Rajballav Sen in the eighteenth century had tried to remarry a minor widowed daughter of his and failed. His son Gopalkrishna had to battle in vain for getting possession of a Kayastha groom for his daughter by a Kayastha woman, he being a Vaidya. Inter-caste marriages have been as much in disfavour as widow remarriage.

Ramgopal Ghosh (1815-1868) was another successful Derozian. His adventures were mercantile, though as his letters reveal he remained alert to developments in European thought. Like Dakshinaranjan he was philanthropic in public causes and active in forums, which other Derozians were not rich enough to undertake. Still there is a link between the Derozians and the political activity which won the country's freedom in that Krishnamohan Banerjee was associated with the Indian Political Association, the immediate forerunner of the Indian National Congress. The moving spirit behind the Association was Surendranath Banerjee, whose father Durgacharan (1819-1870) was known as a Derozian, though he had studied medicine and neither literature nor philosophy.

Free thought and liberalism, though often thwarted and diverted, grows, for freedom is mankind's greatest heritage,

freedom from four-footedness, from dependence on the sun and rain, from priesthood, from custom and from tradition.

Publicly more was made of Michael Madhusudan Dutta and his friends eating beef and drinking liquor at Wilson's (now the Great Eastern) Hotel in 1842 in defiance of taboos and social inhibitions. Dutta and his friends were not Derozians, but the two groups shared one thing in common: a spirit of defiance. Other groups also might have been defiant, but their defiance was less dramatically expressed and hence has not been recorded.

Hindoo College was started in 1817. Rammohun Roy had a role in its establishment, but was so disliked by the prospective donors that he had to operate from behind the scenes. His opposition to the establishment of the Sanskrit College and Oriental learning, though he himself was a product of this institution, was openly expressed six years later in 1823. His advocacy of English education, he taught himself the language late in life, was equally open.Yet he had to be secretive about his connection with the Hindoo College. He had lived mostly in small towns till 1814 and his advocating the freedom of choice in matters of religion (*Gift to Monotheists*) had come out ten years earlier, and should have been forgotten by the time he took residence in the city.

The fact that the book had not been forgotten bears evidence as to how seriously religion was taken then. Till he wrote the book Rammohun had not opposed the burning of widows and we have an idea of the intellectual climate in which Derozio had to teach. The pupils were mostly from the affluent upper castes brought up in orthodoxy. He liked opening their closed minds. His poem *To His Pupils* dramatically survives:

And how you worship truth's omnipotence,
What joyance rains upon me, when I see
Fame, in the mirror of futurity
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain.
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.

Though he taught for only five years, just after the period in which missionaries were engaged in a heated debate with Rammohun on the issue of conversion, Derozio was not interested in turning them into Christians.

Only three among the first group of Derozio's pupils became Christians, but not because of Derozio. Both Hindus and Christians, Ramkamal Sen speaking for the former, and H.H.Wilson for the latter, sought Derozio's removal from the college staff. Even after his dismissal his pupils remained faithful to him and visited him. In the suspicious and licentious atmosphere of those days their visits to their former teacher's house was suspected as being due to their familiarity with his sister.[7]

Few of the Derozians attained eminence as writers or leaders of public opinion or direct contributors to the Bengal Renaissance. That role devolved on others. The Derozians instead initiated a lifestyle, defiant of authority, irreverent towards rituals and ritual objects and setting few limits to freedom of thought which inspired others. Rammohun and his associates and even later, Vidyasagar, were seeking legislative measures for removal of social injustices; the Derozians on the other hand were emphasising social movements in opposition to such practices and beliefs, thereby making an impact much beyond their numbers.

Removal of the sacred thread amounted to defilement when done by others, and renegacy if done by oneself. In either case the loss of caste meant loss of identity as a Hindu, to be recovered only by expiatory acts. Derozio had defined the identity of his pupils as "Hindu by birth and European by education". This was a further break from the ascriptive society and progress

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7. The insinuation that Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee was in love with Derozio's sister, Amelia, for instance.

towards an adoptive one already suggested by Rammohun Roy in 1804. There is discernible parallelism between Brahmos and Derozians, but little convergence. Derozians described Brahmos as having travelled half-way towards themselves. Derozians represented a style of living without an ideology, while the Brahmos had one, and eschewed style to the maxim of simple living and high thinking. Some of the Brahmos were far too rich to be able to live really simply. Only two Derozians were also Brahmos, Tarachand Chakravarty (1806-1855) because of his long relationship with Rammohun Roy, and Ramtonoo Lahiri. However we do not know enough about Chakravarty to find out if being both at the same time involved him in any strain. Ramtonoo Lahiri had discarded his sacred thread in 1841, and later became a Brahmo, and was affable enough to ward off all strain.

The Derozian style of living enabled later generations to adopt Western dress, food and manners. Such Westernised people were both Hindus and Brahmos. One of them was the father of Aurobindo Ghosh who saw to it that his sons were educated in England from an early age. A third distinguished Derozian was Gobindachandra Dutt of the Rambagan Dutt family. He became a Christian, and later went to England with his two famous daughters, Aru and Toru (1856-1877). Toru later went to France and returned to Calcutta in 1873 and studied Sanskrit and translated a number of French poems into English, which she published under the title, *A Sheaf Gleaned from the French Fields.* The Derozian influence persisted long after the teacher died, the sad event occurring soon after his dismissal from the Hindoo College, in 1831.

A certain amount of implicit apostasy can be detected in Derozian attitudes. Though in their time Derozians thought of Brahmos as halting half-way to themselves, it is possible to view them as preparing the ground for the rapid growth of Brahmos in the decades after 1850. Most Brahmos, however, had reservations about the Derozians. The reservations might have

sprung from a lurking suspicion that Derozians, being admirers of Tom Paine, were not Deists but went beyond to an attitude bordering on what later on was termed agnosticism. In the popular mind these reservations are supposed to be related to Derozian indulgence in consumption of alcoholic beverages. There is no authentic evidence of Derozian addiction to alcohol, and the impression might have been a confusion with Michael Madhusudan Dutta, who expressed his defiance of his Hindu descent by public consumption of beef and liquor.

Propagandist accusations are irrelevant, if not wholly mendacious. Brahmins ascribed Rammohun's advocacy of choice of religion on attainment of adulthood to his weakness for Muslim women, but so far no substantial evidence of any liaison or even infatuation has been forthcoming in the 156 years since his death. Brojendranath Bandopadhyaya's biography of Rammohun refutes any such allegation. Similar accusations were made against Dwarkanath Tagore, who patronised the theatre and the actress Esther Leach and counted dancer Lola Montez among his acquaintances.[8] Much material including correspondence was destroyed by Dwarkanath's family and so suspicions continue. Michael Madhusudan Dutta's conversion to Christianity was ascribed to his wanting to marry the daughter of Krishnamohan Banerjee, but though he married twice, none of his wives was Krishnamohan's daughter.

Michael was as important a figure as Derozio had been before him. The two and their friends and admirers set the pattern for the rebellious young in the city and their social protest, which was later substituted by political protest. The latter being outwards towards British rule, muted the social protest against Hindu conformism.

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8. Dwarkanath was externed from the inner family quarters of the Jorasanko house by the female inmates, including his wife (see Blair B. Kling, *Partner in Empire Building,* University of California Press, 1976, pp 46, 160 and 182)

Intervening between these two protests, differing in their nature as well as their period, were the beginnings of a literary activity which has been snowballing ever since. Calcutta was the place in Asia where a massive response to European influence took place, more intense than at older centres of contact, such as Goa, Manila, Madras, and Pondicherry. The Indian reaction was in the first instance military, and the Bengal army trained and drilled in the European system was the result. Territories were acquired up to the Sutlej by 1806. The next reaction was social and religious reform which led to proscription of widow burning in 1829, and the emergence of the Brahmo elite. The third reaction was literary.

Rammohun wrote in English, Bengali, Persian and Urdu and produced excellent prose in all the languages, but his writing was mostly in the form of tracts. Derozio wrote poetry in English. Michael Madhusudan Dutta first wrote in English and then changed over to Bengali. Bankimchandra Chatterjee's first novel was written in English. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar wrote in Bengali and in prose, and was a source of great encouragement to Dutta in regard to the latter's Bengali poetry. The literary upsurge, which roughly coincides with the Bengal Renaissance, made its early attempts, apprenticeship of a sort, in English.

The other Derozians to attain eminence in fields other than rebelliousness were Radhanath Sikdar, Krishnamohan Banerjee, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, Tarachand Chakravarty, Rasikkrishna Mullick, Ramgopal Ghosh, Digambar Mitter and Ramtonoo Lahiri.

Sikdar was the first modern mathematician, though that aspect of his activity is not as well known as it deserves to be. He is remembered as the man who found out that Peak XV in the Himalayas, later known as Mount Everest, was the highest point on the earth's surface. Banerjee wrote a play, *The Persecuted,* which has been forgotten, for Hindus wrongly claim to be more tolerant than other denominations and the play is about the persecution the author had suffered at their hands. Banerjee

endured all that to produce the first 9-volume encyclopaedia in Bengali and to be the President of the Indian Political Association, the first organization of its type.

Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee was critical of the police and the judiciary to a point considered seditious in 1843,[9] but made up by his philanthropy including the gift seven years later, of the land for the Bethune College, the first educational institution for girls. Tarachand Chakravarty qualified for leadership by age, being three years older than the teacher himself, and through editing of the group's journal. *The Bengal Spectator,* founded in 1842 by Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee. Rasikkrishna Mullick and Ramgopal Ghosh held their own in later life, one as an honest and upright official and the other as an enterprising businessman who ventured to Burma for trade in timber. Lahiri was a humble teacher, who maintained contact with all and was selected by Sivanath Sastri in 1909 to be the symbol of nineteenth century Bengal.[10] The rest of the Derozians remained as far unattached to denominations as the times permitted.

The main and lasting contribution was not in the field of thought but in weakening the hold of the ascriptive society. The young in each succeeding generation had to be rebellious. The other contribution was literary. Pearychand Mitra and Krishnamohan Banerjee started a tradition of creative writing which has snowballed. Vidyasagar, Akshaykumar Datta's and finally Madhusudan Dutta added to its mass and velocity to the extent that Krishnamohan Banerjee's and Madhusudan Dutta's apostasy were forgiven, as also Akshaykumar Datta's atheism.

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9. Arabinda Poddar, *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations 1800-1860* Simla 1970 p. 121.

10. Sivanath Sastri's famous social history of nineteenth century Bengal titled *Ramtonoo Lahiri 'O' Tatkalin Bangasamaj.*

CHAPTER XII

THE BRAHMO PHENOMENON

During the one hundred and sixty two years since the foundation of the Brahmo Sabha a fair number of Calcuttans, eminent in various walks of life, became Brahmos. In some ways the phenomenon was, like its counterpart elsewhere, the Arya Samaj, both fundamentalist and liberal. Both went back to the Vedas, emphasizing conscience over the Shastras, morality over rights, and stressed primacy of reason over tradition.

Hinduism had developed a characteristic structure under Brahmin hegemony. Brahmins functioned as priests to families of all other castes, performed the rites, which differed greatly, specific to each caste but avoided dealing with a congregation, even of the same caste, except when imparting general precepts at *kathas* or narrating episodes from the epics. Hinduism had become a federation of castes, each caste being in turn a conglomerate of families related to each other by ties of extended kinship.

The federating castes were Hindu in two respects : they were called so by others, both Christian and Muslim, and secondly, they were arranged in a loose hierarchy in which the relative status between two castes depended on their respective social distance from Brahmins. The structure of what went by the name of Hindu religion and society had accreted through acceptance of Brahmin priesthood at various dates.

In the process, the professional priestly class had appropriated local deities, pushing their own to a dim background.

The worshipers of the local deities were more numerous than those of the Vedic deities, and offerings to them aggregated to more than what accrued to Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva. Thus a very large pantheon came into being. The more the merrier might have been good for the priests, but was distracting to those thinkers who did not profit from the rites. Some of these thinkers produced the Upanishads.

Later thinkers from time to time turned to the Upanishads for scriptural support. Shankara in the ninth century A.D. and Ramanuja in the twelfth and Madhava in the sixteenth had written commentaries on the Upanishads. Rammohun Roy in the nineteenth century also chose some Upanishads and Shankara's commentaries for his guidance. Roy was a Brahmin, influenced a great deal by Islam through education. The Upanishads which satisfied him and the books he wrote and his activities have been mentioned earlier. The influence of Islam was dominant in 1804, when he wrote *Gift to Monotheists*. By 1821 he was finding Christianity a better model and wrote *The Precepts of Jesus*, but by 1823 Empiricism, as evident in his letter advocating education through English, had superseded all.

Formally he remained loyal to Vedanta, the Upanishads and Monism which made more sense to the majority of those he was addressing, than Islamic monotheism, Christian Unitarianism or Empiricism: Those joining the Brahmo Sabha, formed just before Rammohun left for England, committed themselves to belief in an impersonal God, repudiated incarnations, condemned idolatry and caste distinctions. The formation of the Brahmo Sabha occurred at the same time that Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was gathering around him a band of pupils who also were as much a Calcutta phenomenon. At least one prominent Brahmo and an associate of Rammohun, Tarachand Chakravarty, was also a Derozian, and Ramtonoo Lahiri, another Derozian, was to become a Brahmo later. Neither of them dilated upon what he thought of the two groups or the differences between them.

In Rammohun's and after 1840 in Dwarkanath's absence,

the Brahmo Sabha languished. Its relations with the Christian missionaries had been bad, even while Rammohun was around. The missionaries had expected Rammohun to become a convert to Christianity once he had found fault with Hindu practices and publicly appreciated Jesus. Since he did not oblige the missionaries, they attacked Rammohun; the Derozians having similar expectations of Brahmos were more tolerant.

The movement was vitalised again in 1843 by Debendranath Tagore, who had been active in the preceding three years in the *Tattwabodhini Sabha* which he had founded to oppose conversion to Christianity. He ran a journal, *Tattwabodhini Patrika,* to further the cause of his organisation. Debendranath Tagore eschewed Islamic and Christian influences. His thoughts were derived mainly from the Upanishads, though he had reservations about Advaita.

Debendranath Tagore found two of his associates a burden till he parted company with them. Akshaykumar Datta had joined the *Tattwabodhini Patrika* and later the Brahmo Samaj, as the organization founded by Rammohun was renamed in 1843. Akshaykumar Datta in 1850 induced the Samaj to abandon its belief in the infallibility of the Vedas. The Mimansa school of thought was sceptical of the Vedas but that was a school with which Vedantists differed, for Mimansa stressed animal sacrifices. Tagore declared Datta an atheist, probably because of his lack of faith in the Vedas.

Tagore, in 1857, hailed Keshubchandra Sen's joining the Samaj shortly after Akshaykumar Datta had been obliged to leave it for his atheism. Debendranath claimed that he had received a revelation about Keshubchandra Sen and as a result bestowed on him the honorific "Brahmabandhab". But Sen was so much influenced by Christianity as to call himself Jesudas, servant of Jesus.

So Debendranath and Keshubchandra Sen parted company in 1865 over the issue of discarding the sacred thread. Sen's followers took a more active role in modernising life in

the Samaj than Tagore's. The latter came to be called "Adi" or the original Brahmos. Sen's followers discarded the sacred thread as an indicator of the twice-born status of the wearer. In 1873 the traditional sacred thread ceremony was reintroduced in the Adi Brahmo Samaj, and Debendranath perfomed sacred thread ceremonies of his youngest sons, Somedranath and Rabindranath.[1] Though rejection of caste distinctions was one of the tenets of the Samaj since its foundation, during the intervening thirty-nine years no inter-caste marriages had taken place; dining together of different castes might have occurred, but when the *Gayatri* was recited the Kayasthas had to leave the prayer hall.

Brahmins did not permit the other castes to study the Vedas or even learn Sanskrit. Therefore the two epics - bases to popular Hinduism - were rendered into languages that other castes were permitted to learn and use.[2] Like the Derozians, the Brahmos were mainly Brahmins and Kayasthas. The caste from which most practitioners of Hindu medicine came, the Vaidyas, were permitted to learn Sanskrit. Keshubchandra Sen belonged to the Vaidya caste, though at least for two generations previous to his own, none had practised medicine. Keshub's grandfather, Ramkamal Sen, had established a printing press and was one of those responsible for Derozio's dismissal from Hindoo College.

At Sanskrit College, Kayasthas were first admitted in 1853 and by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who was a Brahmin like Debendranath Tagore, but was not a Brahmo. The role of fulfilling the objective modernist needs of society had passed from the hands of the Brahmos after Rammohun left. Under Debendranath the Samaj offered only an alternative to conversion to Christianity.

Leadership of the modernist elements returned to the Brahmos under Keshubchandra Sen. He had to leave home at nineteen, for he took his wife out of purdah, and from 1864 inter-

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1. Rajnarain Bose, *Atmacharit*, 5th Edition, Calcutta, 1985, p.10 .
2. The *Ramayana* was translated by Krittibas Ojha and *Mahabharata* by Kasiram Das.

caste marriages started in the circle around him. Debendranath Tagore and his group did not oppose the marriages, but stayed away from the ceremonies. They did not associate themselves with a widow remarriage, though Vidyasagar had, as in the matter of admitting Kayasthas to Sanskrit studies, forestalled the Brahmos. And he did not claim to be a modernist.

For the greater part of the sixties, relations between Debendranath Tagore and his one-time protege Sen were cordial only to the extent demanded by good manners. The formal break came in 1865 when Keshubchandra Sen gathered those supporting him into a group which called itself *Navavidhan*[3] (New Dispensation).

How did the country look at Brahmos? As late as 1923 Mahatma Gandhi described Rammohun Roy as a puny intellect, an assessment as wrong as it was uncalled for. Yet in the centenary year of Rammohun's death and unrelated to the observance not only did Gandhi denounce untouchability as he had done previously but broke away from his countenance of the caste system, restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage, by allowing his son, a Bania, to marry a Brahmin. Gandhi's denunciation of Rammohun could have been provoked by his struggle for leadership, first against Surendranath Banerjee and then against Chittaranjan Das. The former was not a Brahmo but the latter was a descendant of Bhuvanmohan Das, brother of Durgamohan Das, both Sadharan Brahmos. Durgamohan, holding that example is better than precept, had induced his widowed stepmother to marry a friends of his.

Frequently in his autobiography, Gandhi asks if a 'mere Gujarati' could advise Bengalis. On return from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi's family had gone to Santiniketan for residence. After his visit to the place he took them away, possibly because of the Brahmo atmosphere. Gandhi's attitude towards

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3. Originally called Bharatvarsiya Brahmo Mandir.

untouchability and caste till 1933 was identical to that of the Arya Samaj, though he described himself a Sanatanist. The Arya Samaj was founded in 1875 by Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), also a Gujarati but Brahmin. Dayanand was influenced by Islamic monotheism, but his book *Satyartha Prakash* (The Light of Truth) contains as much criticism of Islam and Christianity as of Puranic Hinduism, idolatry and worship of incarnations, Krishna and Rama. Dayanand had come to Calcutta and met Keshubchandra Sen, and concluded that exclusive dependence on the indigenous Vedas would save him from the irrelevant accusations leveled against Rammohun and his followers as well as from the occasional violence that Keshubchandra Sen's followers faced. The approach to theism, caste and untouchability of the Arya Samaj was similar to that of the Brahmo Samaj.

For asserting that the Vedas were the heritage of all Hindus and not only of Brahmins, Dayanand was chased out of Pune by the Chitpavan Brahmins. Hindu solidarity was a plank of the Arya Samaj to a greater extent than of the Brahmos and while objecting to untouchability the Arya Samaj stood for maintenance of the caste system. That was the approach of Gandhi till 1933, and probably of the intelligentsia all over the country. That might be one of the reasons for the Brahmo Samaj remaining confined to Calcutta in spite of having branches in Kerala, Bihar, Maharashtra and the Punjab which mostly the expatriate Bengalis seem to have joined.

Marriages between Brahmos drawn from different castes had begun in the 1860s. Unlike some Christians and a large number among the Muslims, till very late no Brahmo converts were drawn from the untouchables. That was due to conversion being confined to literates, for Brahmos did not command resources comparable to missionaries or the influence to procure employment for converts.

The Adi Brahmos did not approve of inter-caste marriages, and after the 1865 schism, virtually accepted the advocacy of Bhudev Mukherjee, opposed to both Derozians and

Brahmos, that there should be inter-provincial marriages between members of the same caste. The Tagores, labouring under the stigma of a supposed pollution, had some difficulty in finding grooms for their daughters. Debendranath's two daughters were married to Brahmins from Assam and the Punjab.

Rajnarain Bose, a Brahmo convert from the Kayastha caste, thought of Hindu Melas for which the Tagores provided the venue from 1867. He had Derozian friends but did not join them in their defiance of traditional practices. Conversion to Christianity had declined in incidence but more people were becoming Brahmos. The Hindu Mela stressed the Hindu identity, though earlier Debendranath had contended that "we are Brahmos first and Indians or Hindus afterwards".[4] One of his sons, Ganendranath, elder to Rabindranath, was host to the Mela and the later as a boy, a participant.

Inter-caste marriage led to the second split in 1879, but the cause was not of the marriage being inter-caste but of both the groom and the bride being minors. Brahmos identified child marriages as one of the evils of India, not only Hindu, society. Brahmos contended that example was better than precept, and were disappointed that their leader Keshubchandra Sen had let the entire community down by marrying his 12-year old daughter Suniti to the minor prince Nripendra of Cooch Behar.[5]

The split was led by Sivanath Sastri who engaged in few arguments but believed in a disciplined clean life. His followers called themselves Sadharan Brahmos, neither claiming a Hindu identity like the Adi nor ecstatic about Christ as Navavidhan was. Sivanath Sastri introduced the practice of young Brahmo students signing a pledge to abstain from drinking, smoking and watching theatrical performances. The pledge went out of vogue only in the 1920s. Adi Brahmos staged plays, while

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4. Wm Theodore de Bary (ed.),*Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol.II Columbia University Press New York, 1958.p. 59

5. Vide : Sivanath Sastri, *Atmacharit*, Calcutta, pp. 142-55.

Keshubchandra Sen himself had organized musical (kirtan) performances, and resorted to worshiping of human beings, like Sen himself. Abstinence from watching theatrical performances was confined to the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj

The second split in the Brahmo movement attracted so much attention that some positive aspects of the marriage of Keshubchandra Sen's daughter were obfuscated. The house of Cooch Behar was Hindu by courtesy and had been denied Rajput status even after having ruled the principality for 800 years. The family belonged to the Koch tribe of the Bodo linguistic group, aboriginal to the plains of north India from the Khyber Pass in the west to the Tsangpo gorges in the east. The family had sought marriage to Keshubchandra Sen's daughter because his was the avant grade group disowning caste distinctions in practice. The Brahmo marriage lacked legal status; its progeny could not inherit property. Other Brahmos had not bothered about it. Keshubchandra Sen had been disinherited (not for becoming a Brahmo) but for taking his wife to a Brahmo congregation, defying purdah.

.Cooch Behar could not afford disruption of its line of succession. So the Civil Marriages Act was resorted to, but its scope as an enabling Act was widened from a similar law enacted for converts to Christianity in 1835. One of the marriages contracted under this Act was of Annette Ackroyd (who became godmother to Aurobindo Ghosh and mother of Lord Beveridge). The enabling Act had one unfortunate provision, the denial clause. Since the parties belonged to different castes and the Brahmo identity was unrecognised, they had to declare themselves as non-Hindu. This clause turned Brahmos into a sect.

Encapsulation of functions and identities is a feature of Indian social dynamics. With the conversion of Brahmos into a sect, the movement lost its vigour but continued to produce conscientious men and women, many of whom distinguished themselves in different fields of activities. The Adi Brahmos who were few and did not marry outside the caste were not affected;

the Navavidhan was also a small group loyal to the person of Keshubchandra Sen and was not affected either. Neither of them increased in numbers. The largest group, the Sadharan, were affected, but met the challenge courageously.

Four decades of persecution, and the resulting isolation, were not yet over when a move for seeking rehabilitation in the mainstream of public life started. The event which marked it can be said to be continuation of the Hindu Mela spirit and took the form of the novel, *Gora*, by Rabindranath Tagore. The year was around 1906, immediately after the death of Debendranath Tagore. In spite of successive rifts, Brahmos of one persuasion did not hate those of the others in the manner some factions of the leftists do today. Tagore was criticized for advocating the burial of the hatchet picked up in 1843, but Sadharan Brahmos like Sukumar Ray and Prasantachandra Mahalanobis rallied to his defence. The last named refused to sign the Sivanath Sastri pledge to abstain from drinking, smoking and going to the theatre, in spite of his prospective father-in law's insistence on it, which delayed his marriage.

Herambachandra Moitra, the father-in-law of Mahalanobis, is said to have told an inquirer that he did not know the way to a theatre, only to recall the man to apologise for the untruth but still refused to point out the way. The story, most likely apocryphal, is illustrative of the impression that Brahmo tenacity had in regard to morality, on the people they came in contact with.

Way back to the general Hindu community was smoothened by improvements in the Hindu tenor of life. The rich Hindus were no longer as self-seeking and licentious, nor as anxious to display wealth, as they had been in the days when they were countering the Derozians, the early Christians and the Brahmos. They no longer accused people of giving up the ancestral faith for lure of money or for attraction of women. The Sivanath Sastri pledge and the pursuit of individual eminence had roles to play in changing public attitudes towards Brahmos.

Debendranath Tagore, Keshubchandra Sen, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Vivekananda contributed towards the change by remaining friends in spite of creedal differences.

Rammohun was eminent but controversial. Dwarkanath Tagore's eminence provoked envy and misunderstanding. Debendranath won some acclaim by resisting conversion to Christianity. Keshubchandra Sen was the last controversial Brahmo. Anandamohan Bose (1847-1906) was the first to invite no controversy. He was the first Indian Wrangler at Cambridge, and though active in Brahmo affairs, his, Sivanath Sastri's and Derozian K.M. Banerjee's participation in nationalist politics diverted attention from a person's religious observances to his public activities.

Brahmos, having disowned tradition to a large extent, were the first large group consciously seeking change. They were the only modernists and hence readier to take to non-traditional vocations. Debendranath's son Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923) took up a traditional vocation, but by being the first Indian to successfully compete in the ICS examination proved that his countrymen were not inferior to Englishmen. Anandamohan Bose took to traditional activities like law and mathematics, though not the variety traditional in India. Another Brahmo, Pramathanath Bose, who married Keshubchandra Sen's daughter, became the first Indian geologist and first from this country to publish in 1880 a paper in a scientific journal abroad. By 1895 another Brahmo, Jagadish Chandra Bose had entered the select circle of world scientists. He was followed by yet another Brahmo, Acharya P.C. Ray. Two successive leading physicians, Nilratan Sircar (1861-1943) and Bidhanchandra Roy (1882-1962) were Brahmos, the latter also being the Chief Minister of West Bengal for fourteen years prior to his death. Durgamohan Das's descendants went into the legal profession. The Brahmos contributed seventeen eminent jurists including several High Court judges, one Law Member of the Viceroy's Council and

one Supreme Court judge. The only Indian peerage, that of Rajpur, had been held by the Brahmo Sinhas.

Among the earliest Indian airmen were Brahmos and P.C. Lal in recent years, became the head of the Indian Air Force. Upendrakishore and Sukumar Ray, both writers, and Satyajit Ray, the eminent film director, were Brahmos. The Brahmo century can be calculated variously as ending with the death of Rabindranath Tagore (1941) or of Prasantachandra Mahalanobis (1972).

Brahmo contribution has been the maximum in the field of education. The community established several schools at various places and provided eminent teachers. Ramtonoo Lahiri, Rajnarain Bose, Herambachandra Moitra, Kshitimohan Sen [6], Sivanath Sastri and Umeshchandra Datta were all distinguished teachers and distinguished Brahmos. The University at Santiniketan began as a co-educational school in 1901 and has been an international centre since 1921, and preserves Brahmo standards of culture, taste and simplicity.

Brahmos are among the elite groups of modern India, along with the Parsis of Bombay, the Chitpavans of Pune, the Iyers and Ayyangers of the South, the Kashmiri Pandits of Uttar Pradesh, and the Kayasthas of the Punjab and Bihar. The Brahmos were the most cosmopolitan, having been overwhelmingly drawn from three castes - Brahmins, Vaidyas and Kayasthas - while the others were from a single caste. Their rise to eminence was earlier than all others' except for the Parsis. Brahmos engaged almost wholly in the urban vocations, and except for the Tagores, had no feudal associations. It was they who played the leading role in organising the Indian Political Association, forerunner to the Indian National Congress, as a platform for the educated middle class against the feudal British Indian Association. Sivanath Sastri

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6. According to some members of the Sen family, Kshitimohan was not a Brahmo, although he officiated at many Brahmo ceremonies.

has recorded that "soon after Anandamohan Bose returned from Cambridge, he, I and Surendranath Banerjee discussed the formation of a political association of the middle classes... One day I and Anandamohan Bose went to Iswarchandra Vidyasagar who encouraged the move but declined to become the first President on grounds of failing health"[7] K.M. Banerjee, a former Derozian and Christian, became the first President, Anandamohan Bose the first Secretary and Surendranath Banerjee, Assistant Secretary. Brahmos were ready to cooperate with others.

Brahmo influence can be traced in all major fields of social reform, though not acknowledged. The most important is that religion, in both belief and observances, became an individual's concern. Neither the family nor caste kinsmen exercised authority over it. Though Mahatma Gandhi made an uncalled for attack on Rammohun Roy, his Ethical Religion of 1921 can be traced to the founder of the Brahmo movement having provided the inspiration.

In 1933 Gandhi changed his approach to caste, from one close to the Arya Samajist separateness without discrimination, to the Brahmo abandonment of discrimination in regard to both inter - dining and inter-marriage. The Republican Constitution of 1950 goes further, making penal offence, crass discrimination like untouchability, and opening up temples to all Hindus, a Hindu version of the Brahmo Trust deed of 1830.

As a moral movement, that of the Brahmos has been an exclusively Calcutta phenomenon. Elsewhere it did not strike root and there is much in the city's culture that is Brahmo in origin; public spiritedness and puritanism, for instance. The movement was moral at its start but Christian and Hindu criticism, often bordering on ridicule, Hindu persecution for a brief period and ostracism for a longer period, and finally the Civil Marriages

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7. Sivanath Sastri, *Atmacharit,* pp. 133-34. See also B.B. Majumdar, Indian Political Association and Reform of Legislatures (1818-1917). Calcutta, 1965 pp. 141-42.

Act of 1872 turned the group into a sect. Attitudes are more relaxed now because Brahmos did not accept being a sect.

Indian religious attitudes incline more towards the ritual than the ethical. It has been so since the decline of the ethical religions, Jainism and Buddhism, and the rise of Brahmanism. The description of Hinduism as a federation of castes with Brahmins officiating at the rituals of each would not be far wrong. All castes were clients of the Brahmins but none of them dealt with the priest in a congregation.

CHAPTER XIII

QUEST FOR SCIENCE

English education, introduced in Calcutta as a result of British rule, opened up a new vista, which was absent in the millennia prior to the advent of the British. It opened up connections with the Western world and exchange of new ideas. Calcutta had earlier missed the scientific revolution, because it had not emerged as a city during the lifetime of Galileo and Kepler, and became a trading settlement only 37 years before the death of Newton. The scientific revolution was greatly dependent upon the telescope invented in the last decade of the sixteenth century, and a new curiosity about the universe we live in both in Europe and in India.

A telescope was presented by the Nawab of Arcot in 1791 to the Scindia ruler of Gwalior, Daulat Rao Scindia. The existence of any earlier telescope in India is not known. An observatory was put up at Madras (now Chennai) in 1890 and later shifted to Kodaikanal. Vidyadhar Bhattacharya, a Bengali mathematician, who was astronomer to Raja Sawai Man Singh, made some contact with the Lisbon observatory and among his collection of books exhibited in Jaipur are copies of *Ephemeris* and the *Nautical Almanac*. But the Jantar Mantar observatories built for him used masonry instruments and not optical. The observatory nearest to Calcutta was located at Benaras, more than 500 kilometres away.

Vidyadhar Bhattacharya revised the *fasli* calendar between 1720 and 1740. Little else is known about him and he does not seem to have had any connection with the British at Calcutta. In all probability his remote contacts with Europe were through the

Portuguese at Daman and Diu, established when his patron Sawai Man Singh was Moghul Governor of Gujarat.

Apart from providing contacts between Vidyadhar Bhattacharya and the Lisbon observatory, the Portuguese, the earliest among modern European nations to hold Indian territory, seem to have played an insignificant part in scientific activities.

The Dutch followed the Portuguese and were in the Indian region in the seventeenth country. This period also saw the Dutch establishing themselves as "leaders" of Western civilisation. The invention of the telescope was theirs. The Kovalur observatory at Meenambakkum was built towards the close of the nineteenth century when the need for observations near the equator was felt to correlate seasonal distribution of main sunspot periodicity.

The position changed dramatically after the formation in 1784 of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. It was the country's first learned society and from it flowed other institutions in quick succession. The Sibpur gardens were laid out in 1797, and the Botanical Survey started ten years later, equipped with a herbarium. By the end of the nineteenth century there were as many as 457 persons engaged in botanical exploration spread over the entire country, who reported their findings to Calcutta, where the headquarters of the Botanical Survey was located, and where the Asiatic Society provided scope for exchange of ideas. Manuscripts, inscriptions, coins and monuments also received greater attention. A manuscript copy of the Rig Veda was brought to the Society for inspections by its founder, Sir William Jones.

Sir William Jones died in 1794 but the Society continued its activities. In 1808 the Society was in a way bifurcated with one committee concerning itself with Natural History, Physics and Medicine, and the other with Literature. In 1814 the Society's collections were formed into a Museum which later became the Indian Museum.

In 1832 the Society began publishing its own journal, which has the distinction of having printed in May 1884 the first

paper by Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858 - 1937). The paper dealt with double refraction. Probably Asutosh Mookerjee (1864 - 1924) also contributed to this journal but his publication in 1881, while still a student, in Cambridge, *Messenger of Mathematics,* is more significantly noticed.

Meanwhile the Hindoo (now Presidency) College had been founded in 1817 and its first graduates to attract public attention came out in the decade which witnessed the decipherment of the *Brahmi* script, and Alexander Cunningham locating abandoned Buddhist sites and working out a geography of ancient India. One of these Hindoo College graduates was Radhanath Sikdar, who joined the famous Trigonometric Survey in 1840.

Hindoo College became Presidency College in 1857 and the focal institution of Calcutta University. Just before the change, Akshaykumar Datta (1820 - 1886) distinguished himself as a rationalist and as an early writer of scientific subjects in Bengali.

Till 1880 there had been a solitary Indian who had distinguished himself as a scientific observer. Otherwise the scientific community in Calcutta as well as in the rest of the country consisted exclusively of European residents. The inaugural meeting of the Asiatic Society on January 15, 1784 was attended by 30 Europeans. Indians came into the Society's activities only marginally as field collectors, draughtsmen, illustrators and interpreters of texts. The lone native intruder was Radhanath Sikdar.

Around 1880 a campaign of denigration was begun, and one of the participants in that campaign was no less a person than the Surveyor-General himself, Andrew Waugh. That was a period of intense racism on the part of the British in India. The trauma of the meeting might have contributed to this, but a more likely cause was the opening up of all offices to Indians, which threatened the British monopoly. Major Hedayet Ali Khan was shifted from one job to another lest an Englishman might have to serve under him. The Indian Civil Service (ICS), which ruled the country, had to admit five Indians, and the need for keeping the numbers down

was acutely felt by the British. One Indian, Surendranath Banerjee was dismissed for a minor lapse. Racism reached its climax in the European agitation against the Ilbert Bill in 1883 which had attempted to make Europeans and Indians equal before the law. British Indigo planters even conspired to kidnap the Viceroy, Lord Ripon, who took the initiative to enact such a bill. Lord Ripon had also repealed the Vernacular Press Act which had earlier been passed by Lord Lytton, and in 1883 sponsored the Ilbert Bill.

However, till then few scientific careers were open to Indians. They could only become subordinate surgeons, physicians or engineers, or they could take to teaching in schools. Even in England the prestigious universities of Oxford and Cambridge did not admit non-Anglican students till 1870. When the opinions test was abolished in 1870, Anando Mohan Bose was the first Indian to get admitted to Cambridge. Even on becoming a Wrangler he could not get a teaching job at Presidency College. Jagadish Chandra Bose, on return from England with a Cambridge degree and a Doctorate from London, was appointed Professor of Physics at Presidency College on a salary which was only a third of what his British predecessor had been receiving. Only on his refusal to draw the pittance for three years was the discrimination ended. The incident occurred in 1896 after Bose had demonstrated twice the transmission of electro magnetic waves - popularly known as wireless or radio - through solid walls.

The situation must have been harder for P.N. Bose (1855-1935) sixteen years earlier when his paper on Siwalik fossils was published in the 'Geological Magazine' of London in 1880. Asutosh Mookerjee's paper in the Cambridge *Messenger of Mathematics* came out the following year (1881) and J.C. Bose's in the Journal of the Asiatic Society another three years later (1884).

While the main concern of scientists in the 17th century was in the field of astronomy, and in the 18th, of biology, phenomena discernible by our senses occupied minds in the nineteenth. Mahendralal Sircar (1833 - 1904) obtained his Doctorate in Medicine in 1863. But neither Sircar nor Mookherjee

could pursue a career in Science. Sircar however retained his interest in and close association with physics. Sircar's contemporary in Calcutta then was Father Lafont, who in 1870 started a small observatory at St. Xavier's College. Through their joint efforts they established the Science Association in 1876 at 210 Bowbazar Street where Sircar and Lafont lectured in physics and Kanailal Dey in chemistry. In 1878 the name of the Science Association was changed to Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science and a lecture hall was added to the building in 1884, and the Vizianagram laboratory in 1891.

At this stage Asutosh Mookerjee also started lecturing in physics and mathematics usually after a busy day devoted to the legal profession. Later he was joined by Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray (1861 - 1944) who lectured in physics and chemistry respectively. But no research was undertaken until C.V. Raman (1888 - 1970) was posted to Calcutta as an officer in the Indian Audit and Accounts Service in 1907. Though mostly in his spare time, Raman continued his research at the Association for the next 23 years; in 1917 he joined the University College of Science and was later awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930, the third Nobel Prize that Calcutta was able to win.[1]

Asutosh Mookerjee became the Vice - Chancellor of Calcutta University in 1906 and set about to establish the University College of Science in 1912. The ruling British Government did not agree to provide the requisite funds and Mookerjee had to raise large sums of money from donors, the two notable being Taraknath Palit and Rashbehari Ghosh, both of whom were successful lawyers. The best talent available was appointed to professorships and lectureships, though the emphasis was on research and not on routine teaching.

Along with the University College of Science was founded

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1. C.V. Raman's first book, *Defraction of Light,* published in 1922, was dedicated to Asutosh Mookerjee.

the Indian Science Congress in 1914. Asutosh Mookerjee brought it into being. The Congress meets every year at different venues in the country but its permanent offices were located in the Indian Association for Cultivation of Science, which in 1954 was shifted from 210 Bowbazar Street to a more spacious site in the Jadavpur University Campus.

Jagadish Chandra Bose founded his own Bose Institute for research in 1917. The School of Tropical Medicine, the Bose Institute and the School of Physics have had exceptional work to their credit. In chemistry there was no achievement as dramatic as the work of Ross on malaria or of Raman on the scattering of light. Prafulla Chandra Ray's first success was the preparation of crystalline mercurous nitrate, earlier regarded as unstable. Both these researches were done at Presidency College. At the same time Upendranath Brahmachari in 1917 found Urea Stibamine as a specific for Kala-ajar. Brahmachari missed the Nobel Prize, because during the war years no prize was awarded.

The University College of Science had its first triumph in 1920 when Meghnad Saha furnished an equation for deduction from spectral analysis the temperature on the surface of a star as well as the predominant element. In 1924 Satyendranath Bose gave a new theoretical derivation of Max Planck's famous radiation law which had ushered in the Quantum Theory. In this paper, which was translated into German by Einstein himself, and published in *Zeitschrift für Physik,* Bose introduced a new form of statistics which Einstein successfully adopted in his theory and which forms the basis of the modern quantum theory.

Neither Saha nor S.N. Bose got the Nobel Prize, presumably because of their strong nationalist attitudes. But when Enrico Fermi of Italy was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1938, it was recognised that Fermi's first work of importance was an extension of Saha's theory of thermal ionization. The work which brought Fermi to the forefront among physicists, is the discovery of Fermi Statistics, a work which was inspired by that of S.N. Bose.

Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray were the first two scientists to be educated in Britain. These two were the only scientists among the Bengalis to distinguish themselves after being educated abroad. All the other scientists went abroad after having distinguished themselves at home. Even these two did the work, which earned them fame, at home, in the ill-equipped laboratories of Calcutta. Einstein is said to have once remarked that for each one of J.C. Bose's experiments he deserved a Nobel Prize (as stated by Dr. Shyamadas Chatterjee in an interview with the author).

Between 1863 and 1886 four outstanding men of Science appeared on the Calcutta scene. Mohendralal Sircar (1833-1904) was a physician, while the other three were mathematicians (Goorudas Banerjee, Anandamohan Bose and Asutosh Mookerjee). There were no careers in science open to Indians then. Sikdar in the Trigonometrical Survey and P.N. Bose in the Geological Survey were freaks. So the four mentioned above had to earn their livelihood through medical and legal practices, though they retained their interest in science.

Six years after acquiring his M.D., Sircar published a prospectus for the cultivation of science among "educated natives" of Bengal. One of the reasons for there being three successive mathematicians could have been a desire to escape from the heated debate on religious matters prevailing then. There was as internal logic in Mathematics which shut out social and religious issues. It was escapism of a sort, but hard to decry. Goorudas Banerjee, passing out in 1864, Anandamohan Bose in 1868 and Asutosh Mookerjee in 1886 had all to take up legal practice. This in spite of Bose having become a Cambridge Wrangler, and Asutosh Mookerjee having given "an elegant new proof of the 25th proposition of the first book of Euclid". Mookerjee had contributed sixteen original papers to scientific journals.

Mookerjee wanted to pursue a career in science after having done post-graduate work in both physics and mathematics. Goorudas Banerjee, himself a mathematician who had to take up

legal profession for a living, was then the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University and sympathetic to Mookerjee, but he could not find the Rs. 4,000/- yearly which could have permitted the younger man to pursue his interests. Mookerjee therefore had to enrol himself as a Vakil to practise in the High Court at Calcutta as a junior to Rashbehari Ghosh.

Both Bose and P.C. Ray led frugal lives, the former in spite of his numerous delegations outside to represent India. Their considerable savings went into public causes. Through his simplicity and lack of ostentation Ray gave the impression of being a religious person, but late Dr. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (not to be confused with the former Congress (I) minister), who had studied in detail developments in science and philosophy in India, told the author that Ray was an out and out rationalist. In fact Chattopadhyaya rated Ray close to Akshaykumar Datta (mentioned in previous chapters) who openly averred his atheism.

C.V. Raman, who did his research in Calcutta for twenty-three years, throughout his writings mentioned God only once and in such general terms as to hint at neither belief nor disbelief. Raman's remains were cremated without any religious ceremony as he had willed. For all practical purposes, by the first four decades of the 20th century, science in Bengal had attained an autonomy searching for causes of natural phenomena in nature itself, not caring for the dictates of religion. From Rammohun to Raman through Akshaykumar Datta, Vidyasagar and P.C. Ray , there was a recurring but consistent effort to free science of religion.

Chronologically, from Rammohun's early selectiveness in regard to the Upanishads (1814) and later scepticism about both Vedanta and Nyaya (1823), and Vidyasagar's dismissal of Sankhya and Nyaya as poor disciplines (1853), we have Prafulla Chandra Ray's diagnosis of the atrophying of scientific thought and activity in India in 1908. P.C. Ray blamed the caste system and the Vedanta philosophy as modified by Shankara.[2] He singles out Shankara's criticism of Kanada and the latter's system for blame. Kanada was an ancient thinker, earlier than Buddha, who had thought of

atoms as the ultimate unit of matter. Though Ray's book was titled *Hindu Chemistry* the decline coincided with the decline of Buddhism, for an Arab scholar in Spain (EI Andalusi) writing in the 9th century A.D. considered India to be the leading country in matters of science.

Azizul Haque, while Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University in the mid-thirties, found one of the teachers of astronomy taking a purificatory dip in the Hooghly during an eclipse. He asked for a society in the University to eradicate superstition and he was told that what was true to reason may not be the same in faith. The emphasis was on faith.

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2. P.C. Ray, *Hindu Chemistry,* Vol.II, p.107, 1908. This view of Ray was later repeated by Meghnad Saha.

CHAPTER XIV

MODERNITY AND TRADITION

In modern Bengal (that is after 1793 A.D. when Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement), two opposing trends appeared, one for modernization, and the other for a return to the old pattern of life.

Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement created a new landed aristocracy. The new landed aristocracy of Bengal was anxious to rehabilitate itself from the old feudal pattern by ritual conformism and by subordination to the ruling authority. Even their rights as renters were never claimed till 1840 when the Landholders' Society was formed in a move to limit bureaucratic excesses.

Yet, the new aristocracy was liberal and due to its munificence many of the institutions Bengal is proud of came into being. Most importantly this new aristocracy supported the liberal professions - of lawyers, physicians and teachers which became the backbone of the rising political middle class. At least Dwarkanath Tagore was wholly the product of this new aristocracy.

Rammohun Roy had slightly different antecedents but as far as his role as social reformer was concerned he was more hated than admired.

Between them Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore did usher in a period of intellectual ferment. They had their opponents, men matching in wealth and integrity - Radhakanta Deb and Motilal Seal. The last named was the solitary person

who refused to convert his earnings from trade into a zemindari, but that did not mean that the feudal rituals established in an earlier age were given a go by in his household. The compulsions of the life-style of a rich man - landowner or trader - were almost identical.

In a society in which every action of an individual was governed by the faith he subscribed to (or more correctly he was born in) religion ceased to be a matter of conscience. This may seem a little incongruous because it suggests the existence of a period when conscience had primacy over conformism. Historically such a period remains unidentified though there is evidence to suggest that between 500 B.C. and 200 B.C. an individual could choose between Jainism and Buddhism and between 100 A.D. and 600 A.D. between Buddhism and Hinduism. The memory of such freedom had been long lost, so much that Rammohun Roy, the maker of modern India, was not aware of Asoka's Edicts because the Brahmi script was in the process of being deciphered in his time. It would be a reasonable speculation whether Rammohun would have turned to the Upanishads instead of the Edicts had they been deciphered before he left the shores of India.

However the Edicts do not seem to have impressed Dwarkanath's son Debendranath (1818 - 1906) even though the latter was courageous enough in 1864 to reject the orthodox contention that the Vedas were infallible. Between 1864 and 1875, when the Arya Samaj was founded, a rift developed between the intelligentsia of Bengal and that of the rest of India which has not been fully healed yet, Keshub Sen was one of Debendranath's errant disciples, who wanted to incorporate Christian virtues into Hinduism. Dayananda Saraswati from Gujarat spent a long time arguing with Sen that Vedic Hinduism cleaned of its subsequent encrustations, was adequate for a clean religious life, and there was no need to borrow from the west. The Arya Samaj was founded as an expression of indigenous religious fundamentalism - an ugly word now but not then.

English education introduced in 1835 on a scale to mop up the progeny of the elite in all district towns was able to produce from 1844 onwards successive generations of Bengalis, whose Hindu birth and European education, did not seem irreconcilable. These young men began trickling into the Indian Civil Service from 1861 onwards on merit, judged at a competitive examination for Englishmen at which they appeared and distinguished themselves. After 1871 when Oxbridge opened its doors to non-Anglicans they went there. Others went to the Inns of Court to become barristers.

By the latter part of the 19th century a small westernised elite had come into being. This elite was larger in Bengal than in the rest of the country. What was more important was that since 1878, and more particularly since the Ilbert Bill of 1883, this westernised elite claimed equality of status with the British, whether members of the ruling bureaucracy or of the trading and planting community.

Opposition to the Ilbert Bill (drafted by an Indian member of the ICS) which gave powers to Indian judges to try Europeans was vehemently resented by the planters, most of whom in their treatment of servants and labourers often overstepped the limits of what was permissible under the law. The Bill was dropped but it left a trail of racial bitterness which was never erased. The following year local self-governing institutions were statutorily established which further exacerbated the European minority. In 1892 Indian representation in the legislatures was increased which incensed the Europeans even more.

So by the end of the century the political struggle between the entrenched Europeans and the Indian elite had reached a level of acerbity which would have been unimaginable during the time when Governors-General like Bentinck lent their ears to enlightened Indians. The westernised Indian elite had to battle not only with the European vested interests but also with Indian orthodoxy. The latter were jealous of the westernised elite, whom they treated as the *nouveau riche.* Since cast restrictions were

based on food and dress, the westernised elite's life-styles had been under fire since the time of Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore. But two swallows do not make a summer; the alarm was sounded only when there were hundreds of them.

However, the situation had been saved by mediators. The first one was Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar who in spite of his radicalism (advocacy of widow remarriage and inclusion of Western philosophy in the curriculum of the Sanskrit College escaped bitter attack because he never forsook his pandit's dress). His agnosticism was ignored; his abjuration of European clothes was remembered. The last important mediator was Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836 - 1886).

Ramakrishna's had been a very disturbed soul. He had sought guidance from Vidyasagar, Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Sen, and ultimately came to the conclusion that all faiths were equally satisfying if pursued sincerely and therefore all religious polemics were unnecessary. Faith was all that was necessary. Ramakrishna found a disciple in Vivekananda who tried to make up a singular deficiency of Hinduism - its lack of an organisation for charitable and humanitarian services. He had addressed a World Congress of Religions at which Hinduism appeared on terms of equality with Christianity, whose missionaries in India had often attacked Hinduism for its lack of ethics.

British discovery of Hinduism began around 1760 and later swept through Europe. The feedback of Europe's Oriental Renaissance was being received in India from 1860 onwards and had built itself into a massive source of self gratification by the end of the 19th century. Hindus did not have to be ashamed of their customs because they had something much above it, an ancient civilisation.

Till that time dating of antiquity was confined to Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Persia. Deciphering of multilingual inscriptions had made reconstruction of dynastic lists possible. The base dates were 600 B.C. in Persia, 800 B.C. in Greece,

1700 B.C. in Babylon and about 2000 B.C. in Egypt. No chronology was available in India prior to Alexander's invasion of 323 B.C. and all speculations about the antiquity of Indian civilization was based on the relative archaism of the language of texts. So an absurd antiquity was assigned to Indian Sanskrit civilization as comparable to Egypt's and Babylon's though till then the Harappan civilisation had not been discovered.

It was usual to boast that India's civilisation had survived while those of its ancient compeers had dissolved into barbarism. This was far from the truth - the survival or dissolution in each case was about the same - but by frequent repetition it came to be believed. In this ignorance of facts lay the seed of cultural nationalism. The emotional purpose served by this cultural nationalism was that it made up for lack of an apparatus through which political nationalism could find expression.

British Liberals (Macaulay, Ripon and Hume) had provided the rudiments of a political apparatus; universities. local Self-government, legislatures and the Indian National Congress. The tradition of working such organisations were lacking and between 1899 and 1904 Europeans resident in India, both official and non-official, wanted Government interference in the Calcutta University and Calcutta Municipal Corporation, and splitting of the biggest legislature with the largest Indian representation into two separate legislatures. The last mentioned resulted in the first partition of Bengal. All these regressive measures were resented and led to agitation and years of terrorism.

It might be useful to point out the difference in the social consciousness between Bengal and other parts of India. The first Bengali to return from a trip overseas was Dwarkanath Tagore but in 1843 he was neither expected to nor did he perform purificatory rites. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi from Gujarat and Jaya Prakash Narayan from Bihar did perform these rites in 1890 and 1929 respectively.

Most Indians believed that their country had been conquered by the British, and hence the appeal to violence expressed either in individual acts of terrorism or insurrection.

For a short while when Rammohun Roy was active, Voltaire had been more than a mere name to the Indian elite but that was only in Bengal. The rest of the country had hardly heard of Voltaire or Tom Paine. Neither of them were Chenghiz Khan or Tamerlane. Hitler and Mussolini as the modern counterparts of the Mongol marauders were more intelligible, at least more substantive than an Einstein or a Freud fleeing the Nazi storm troopers.

Gandhi, to whom the elite including Nehru, had surrendered their reason, once wrote to Prof. Nirmal Bose, that he had heard the name of Freud only from another professor - a mere academic exercise. And about Einstein there is no Gandhian comment available, but about his forerunner Newton, Gandhi wrote in his *Non-violence in Peace and War* that the Vedic rishis were greater intellectuals than that Englishman!

ANNEXURES

Some Builders of Modern Bengal

I

PRIYAMBADA DEVI
A PIONEER IN MODERNISM

With the resurgence of science and modern ideas, Bengal not only witnessed an upsurge of scientific achievements and scientists but also a tremendous growth in modern thinking and writing. And these were not limited only to men, but encompassed womenfolk too, both in the cities as well as in rural societies. This certainly was, in large measure, at least in the beginning, a result of the growth and expansion of the Brahmo movement. Sibnath Sastri's daughter, Hemlata Devi (1868 - 1943), born in South 24 Parganas, went to Darjeeling to establish a girls' school there with the assistance of two other Brahmo friends. The school, which is still there, was named "Maharani Girls' School". She was also later one of the few elected Commissioners of the Calcutta Corporation and wrote a number of books. And she was not alone.

Amongst some others whose names I may briefly mention in this presentation are Sarojini Naidu (1879 - 1949), daughter of Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, who studied in England, later returned to Hyderabad where her father, who hailed from Dacca (now in Bangladesh), became a practising physician, and married a south Indian Dr. M.G.R. Naidu. She joined politics in 1915 and became a leader of the Indian National Congress and died as Governor of United Provinces in 1949. She wrote a number of books in verse in English and was popularly known as the 'Nightingale' of India.

Others included poetess Mrinalini Sen (1879-1972) who, not being happy with her first husband Indra Chandra Singha of Paikpara Raj family, came back to her parents' house in Bhagalpur, and sometime afterwards married Ramen Sen, a son of Keshubchandra Sen. Her poems written in English were later published as a book titled *Knocking at the Door*. There were many others who became famous as poets like the two sisters Aru and Toru Dutt, whose father was a Barrister, and had become a Christian. The father, Gobindo Chandra Dutt was a Derozian and took his two daughters to England. Toru later went to France, and returned to Calcutta in 1873 and studied Sanskrit. She translated a number of French poems into English and published them under the title, *A Sheaf Gleaned from French Fields*.

Among those who became important socially, culturally and politically, were Sarala Devi, a niece of Rabindranath Tagore who organized physical culture clubs and travelled all over the country to organize political movements for the independence of the country. During the first non-cooperation movement in which she had actively participated, Mahatma Gandhi was attracted by her. One of her associates in the first decades of the 20th century was Priyambada Devi, whom I shall try to portray in this chapter.

* * *

Priyambada also belonged to the elitist social circle of Calcutta and was well-cared for. She was married to a lawyer, Taradas Banerjee, in Raipur, Madhya Pradesh, after obtaining her B.A. degree with Honours in Sanskrit from the Bethune College of Calcutta, but lived with her mother for the rest of her life after her husband's death. Her maternal uncles, Asutosh, Jogesh Chandra, Kumudnath and the eminent literateur Pramatha

Chaudhury were all well-respected pillars of the Calcutta society. Her feminine social circle included the two daughters of the Brahmo leader Keshub Sen, Suniti and Sucharu, married to the royal families of Cooch-Behar and Mayurbhanj respectively, as well as Jagadish Chandra Bose's wife Abala Bose, Ramananda Chatterjee's two daughters Sita and Shanta and many others. So she was never really lonely after her husband's demise and had strong social, intellectual and literary connections which included Rabindranath Tagore whom she first met at the residence of her maternal grandfather, Durgadas Chaudhury in 1886, and his two nieces Indira Devi, who was married to her uncle Pramatha Chaudhury and Sarala Devi, who, as mentioned, was deeply involved in the revolutionary movement. She was a very able social activist and had not developed any social inhibition particularly about gender problems.

Priyambada's political attachments were also strong. Her uncle Jogesh Chandra Chaudhury, was associated with the Congress. He had married the daughter of Surendranath Banerjee. Her uncle Ashutosh Chaudhury was known to help the militant revolutionaries of the time privately. Patriotic poet and singer Mukunda Das used to sing in his house at Sunny Park during the years 1918-19. Priyambada was attracted by his patriotic songs, and a strong bond of affection had developed between Mukunda Das and Priyambada so much so that whenever, and that was quite often in those days, Mukunda Das was arrested by the British police, his daughter, Sulava, was sheltered in her house by Priyambada. The British did not like it, but Priyambada could not care less.

Priyambada had an unorthodox non-traditional upbringing. Although her mother Prasannamoyee was married to a wealthy Zamindar, a Kulin brahmin, Krishna Kumar Bagchi of Gunaigacha in Pabna, she did not live with him because of the rustic rural atmosophere there. She preferred to live with her father, Durgadas Chaudhury, who was a Senior Administrative Officer of the Government and moved from one place to another.

And her only child Priyambada was born in Jessore when her maternal grandfather was posted there. Prasannamoyee had deeply imbibed the elitist urbane culture of the then Calcutta. She revolted against the rural feudal aristocratic set-up of her in-laws, at least that is what Priyambada's biographer, Prof. Sumita Chakravarty, indicates in her introduction to *Shabda - Naishabder Chitra* (published by Mandira Sen, Calcutta, 1996)

There were two clearly distinct trends that merged in the intellectual-cultural make-up of Priyambada. Her mother was an established poet of those times. The eldest uncle, Ashutosh Chaudhury, although a well-established Barrister, was an important leader of the literary cultural set-up of Calcutta, and a friend of Rabindranath Tagore through the two families' marital links. His younger brother Pramatha Choudhury was married to Tagore's niece, Indira Devi, and published the powerful intellectual journal *Sabuj Patra.* Priyambada grew up in the close the atmosphere of close intellectual cultural ties with the Tagores.

Priyambada was also connected with various social and political activities, and thereby mixed with various types and kinds of people, particularly after her short-lived love affair with the eminent Japanese artist, Count Okakura Kakuzo. I will come to that later in this paper.

She was also associated with Bharat Stree Mahamandal and Women's Handicraft Centre from their very foundation in 1910, and had accompanied Sarala Devi to the All India Women's Conference of the Indian National Congress at Allahabad. She became Secretary of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal located at "Tarabas"; 46, Jhautala Road, Ballygunge, Calcutta, the house she had built and where she and her mother lived.

Beyond the limited circle of acquaintances in connection with her work she was able to contact many other talented persons and political activists, which was not very easy for a single woman in those times. Among her friends the first one who should be mentioned was the poet Tagore, ten years her senior,

whom she met when he visited her maternal grandfather Durgadas Chaudhury in Krishnagar in 1886. That year Tagore's niece Pratibha was married to her uncle Ashutosh Chaudhury.

But her most important friendship began in 1912 when she met the talented Japanese artist Okakura Kakuzo at the house of her maternal uncles, the Chaudhurys. Okakura had first come to India in 1901 when he had stayed with the Tagores and had influenced the Tagores into initiating an art movement in India. Since then he had been a close friend of Rabindranath, Abanindranath, Suren Tagore, Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita. Okakura was not well when he came in 1912 and as Suren Tagore had later observed, "his brow was there, his smile was there but there was also an impalpable difference, as of some shadow fallen over him". When Okakura first met Priyambada in 1912 who lost her husband in 1895 and her only son in 1906, she appeared to him like a "thin-edged, light-coloured Japanese painting". He drew a picture that probably still lies in Japan. Thence started a regular correspondene between the two. Okakura's letters to Priyambada were published in the Vishwabharati Quarterly in the Autumn issue of 1955 under the caption "Letters to a Friend". Okakura had also translated Priyambada's poems into Japanese and had used them in his musical dramas.

In one of his letters Okakura wrote to Priyambada : "Please do not tell me that you are not the Jade tree... I had hoped to have found the tree at last. Is it not there, half revealed in the glooming mist, enthroned in the immaculate snow of the Himalayas; bearing a prophecy of the eternal spring? If I am not allowed to pluck a petal, may I not bathe in its fragrance from a distance? Don't tell me you are not the jade-tree" * (letter dated 4th March, 1913).

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* According to the Chinese (Confucius) concept the epitome of purity, chastity and softened beauty is found in Jade. A jade tree symbolises a perfect world.

Priyambada replied to Okakura about his description of herself as a 'jewel of the jade'. She wrote to him on 21st April, 1913. "Who wants to be perfect - I don't. Perfection means cessation of growth. I want to be imperfect and grow, to be alive, awake and with longings". She had proved that in her later life when she became actively engaged in secret revolutionary work.

In 1978 English writings of Okakura Kakuzo were published in three volumes. In the third volume of that collection two note-books of Priyambada were published.

Some of the verses which she had written, she sent to Okakura and were published in Okakura's 3 - Volume English writings. Below are excerpts from probably the first of such verses.

THE UNSATISFIED LONGING

I (can) not hold thee, cannot hold thee, blend thee in my heart and make thee mine - thou light of the skies I cannot hold thee although I love thee ever and love thee much.

I cannot bind thee, cannot bind thee, weave thee and twine thee even into new rhymes, oh my love, my all - I cannot bind thee, as I cannot find the words to create the form I dream of, love and long for.

The poems in the notebook of Priyambada are truly gems of romantic literature and I know of very few people who could write such truly great romantic verses in a foreign language. So were her Bengali verses, some of which Rabindranath had published as his own only to be corrected by Priyambada about the mistake (see the introduction to *Shabda - Nishabder Chitra,* p.13)

Priyambada had an intimate relationship with Rabindranath and had even sent a donation to him for the Santiniketan School in 1314 B.S. when the School was in financial crisis. But despite their liking each other she maintained a distance from Tagore.

She wrote to Okakura : "He (Tagore) does not discourage but asks me to go on translating them (Priyambada's poems) .....I know he thinks I have not used my gifts well.....He is a man and cannot realise that a woman's life is limited by many things."

Nine of Rabindranath's letters to Priyambada and only two of Priyambada's to him are available. When Tagore got the Nobel prize, she congratulated him, but she regarded him only as an elderly person. After the death of her son, when Tagore wrote her a few letters advising her to come out of her shell, there was a touch of intimacy. The fact that Priyambada slowly came out of her shell and began to write more and more was perhaps a little due to Tagore's urgings and advice. But undoubtedly Okakura's influence was the most significant. Okakura's letters reveal an emotional and loving tone.

Priyambada did also teach at the Brahmo Girls' School for a while probably to get over the biggest shock of her life, the death of Okakura, and as soon as she was able to get out of it she dedicated her life to political activism and writing.

She had regularly contributed articles and poems to all the leading journals of those days, but her real literary creations were the translation of Vyasa's "Swapna Vasabadatta". She had translated large portions of the Bible, and her writings on the lives of Geisha girls probably to recount Japanese lives, could be a tribute to her friend and lover, Okakura. She wrote a lengthy short story, entitled "Renuka" and published about five books of poems. She had also contributed poems to the post-Tagorean literary journal, *Kallol,* between 1923 and 1930.

The mother and daughter were born in a traditional Hindu family but they were not circumvented by its orthodoxy. Neither

her mother Prasannamoyee nor Priyambada were prepared to accept defeat in life because of personal losses. This sense of life and its joy of fulfilment Primyambada had learned from her mother. If we look back at the society even in renascent Bengal, not to speak of India one hundred years ago, theirs was not a mean achievement.

* * *

II

RAJA RADHAKANTA DEV (1784-1867)

Grandson of Raja Nabakrishna Dev, who served Lord Clive as his agent. Clive's munificence was the source of the family's immense fortune. This association with and dependence on the English were indispensable factors in the family's prosperity.

Raja Nabakrishna, founder of the Sovabazar (in north Calcutta) Raj family had his favourite grandson married to the daughter of Gopikanta Sinha, who was then the *gosthipati,* the leader of his community. This marriage elevated Radhakanta in turn to the position of *gosthipati* and entitled him to "the first honours in every formal assembly of Hindus". The head of the community was expected to be the custodian of the ethos, and Radhakanta did his best to be a worthy custodian. Thus, in his address of thanks to Lord Hastings on his departure from Bengal, Radhakanta proposed that Hastings should be particularly thanked for "the protection and encouragement which he had afforded to the ancient and orthodox practice of widows burning themselves

in their husbands' pyres". This was however lost in the cry of the meeting which was decidedly against it.

His championing of traditional values however, did not stop him from speaking against taboos on food, rigidity of the caste system and other social ills. On one occasion, he told Bishop Heber "we did not shut up our women till the Muslims came" and he advocated and helped women's education. Despite his attachment to traditional values, he developed a strong interest in western science, lending his prestige in every useful undertaking, attending scientific exhibitions at the houses of his European friends, and assisted young medical graduates financially to go to England for higher training.

His orthodoxy was thus not total, but mixed with modern educational values. "It combined", in the words of the great Sanskritist H.H. Wilson, "a devoted attachment to the institutions of religion of his country, with a liberal participation in all public measures for improving the education of his countrymen by the efficient use of the English language and European literature and science" (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol 13, p. 209).

Bishop Heber, whom Radhakanta had first visited in 1824 said of him : "He is a young man of pleasing countenance and manners, speaks English well, and has read many of our popular authors, particularly historical and geographical. He lives a good deal with Europeans, and has been very laudably active and liberal in forwarding both by money and exertions, the education of his countrymen" (Rev. R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey* (1824-25), London, Vol.1, p. 71).

Thus he became a founder-director of Hindu College since its foundation in 1817, though it meant elimination of its main architect, Rammohun Roy. When Debendranath Tagore established the free model school for Hindus to counteract the activities of Christian missionaries, Radhakanta Dev not only helped it with financial assistance but was chosen President of the school committee.

Radhakanta not only kept Rammohun Roy outside the committee of the Hindu College, but was also instrumental in removing from teachership of the College in 1831, Henry Derozio, the leader of "Young Bengal", the social reform movement, as well as the two leading members of the movement, Rasikkrishna Mullick and Krishnamohan Bandopadhyaya from the Hare School.

Radhakanta Dev's most outstanding intellectual contribution was the compilation of the seven-volume Sanskrit dictionary, *Sabdakalpadruma,* which took forty years of strenuous work. This dictionary of inestimable value has yet to be surpassed in merit. The first volume of this dictionary was published in 1822 and the last in 1852 and an appendix was added in 1858.

* * *

III

HENRY LOUIS VIVIAN DEROZIO (1809-1831)

Born of a Portuguese father and an English mother, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio in his twenty-two years became the embodiment of an intellectual challenge.

As a student of Dharmatala Academy, Derozio impressed Dr. John Grant, then editor of *India Gazette*. What also impressed Grant was the "interesting sight to behold the native children sitting side by side with the sons of Europeans". This racially free atmosphere formed in young Derozio the spirit of liberal

humanism which he taught his students when he later became a teacher of Hindu College.

Derozio had to leave Calcutta when he was fourteen to work in a mercantile firm at Bhagalpur in Bihar where he began to write poetry. Poetic efforts brought him back to Calcutta and in 1826 he was appointed a teacher of the Hindu College. His poetry reflected his radical thinking and as a poet he was greatly influenced by Byron, and shared Byron's resentment of the wrong. In 1827 Derozio published a small volume of poems which was highly commended by the *Calcutta Gazette.*

Derozio did not share the attitude of most members of the Eurasian community who looked to England as their 'home'. For him India was his motherland and when he was only eighteen, he wrote the poem "To India, My Native Land" which initiated many educated Bengalis to patriotic values.

TO INDIA, MY NATIVE LAND

My country! in the days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
And worshipped as a deity thou wast -
Where is thy glory, where that reverence now?
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last
And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou,
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee,
Save the sad story of thy misery!
Well - let me dive into the depths of time.
And bring from out the ages that have rolled
A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime,
Which human eye may never more behold;
And let the guerdon of my labour be,
My fallen country! one kind wish for thee!

Before he died at the age of 22, Derozio had succeeded in generating an awakening and awareness of the contemporary human situation in his pupils and instil in them an urge to look

beyond to freedom and regeneration of man. All his pupils have testified to the inspiration that they received from him as well as to his affection as a teacher. One of his pupils, Radhanath Sikdar, said that Derozio's instructions were not only invaluable but also the very guiding principle in his life.

Excerpts of an account of Derozio's conduct as a teacher by a clerk of the Hindu College, Haramohan Chattopadhyaya, is given below :

"The students of the first, second and third classes had the advantage of attending a conversazione established in the school by Mr. Derozio, where readings in poetry, and literature and moral philosophy were carried on. The meetings were held almost daily after or before school hours. Though they were without the knowledge or sanction of the authorities yet Mr. Derozio's disinterested zeal and devotion in bringing up the students in those subjects was unbounded, and characterised by a love and philanthropy which up to this day, has not been equalled by any teacher...The students in their turn loved him most tenderly; and were ever ready to be guided by his counsels and imitate him in their daily actions in life....he fostered their taste in literature; taught the evil effects of idolatry and superstition; and so far formed their moral conceptions and feelings as to place them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age."

Charges were brought against Derozio by conservative directors of the college which can be summed up as (1) that he was an atheist, (2) he did not consider respect and obedience to parents as part of one's moral obligation and (3) he even considered marriage between brothers and sisters as right. When the Board of Directors decided upon his removal, Derozio himself sent a letter to Dr. H.H. Wilson, Vice-President of the Board, refuting the allegations, and resigned. The College authorities, at the instance of Ramkamal Sen (grandfather of Keshubchandra Sen) removed "the dangerous corrupter of youth" on April 25, 1831. Derozio died of cholera in December the same year.

But the intellectual challenge which he initiated went a long way to hasten the emergence of a new generation of Bengalis who came to be known as Derozians or "the Young Bengal movement", and heralded a new epoch in Bengal's cultural history.

IV

THE DEROZIANS

Tarachand Chakravarti (1806-1855)

The prominent personalities of the Young Bengal group were about ten in number. The seniormost was Tarachand Chakravarti who was a pre-Derozian student member of the Rammohun circle and the first secretary of the Brahmo Sabha. Born in a poor family, he had to leave school at the age of 22. Through Rammohun's help he worked as the English translator for Buckingham's *Calcutta Journal* and also worked for two Bengali journals, *Chandrika* and *Kaumudi.* He also translated into English some old scriptures for Dr. H.H. Wilson and edited the *Manu Samhita* with original Sanskrit texts. Later he took over the editorial responsibility of the Derozian journal, *The Bengal Spectator,* while Ramgopal Ghose remained its editor formally.

*Krishnamohan Banerjee (*1813-1885)

The most important among the Derozians was Krishnamohan Banerjee, born in a poor Brahmin family. He was expelled from home in 1831 on account of a beef-eating escapade in his house with his young friends. Later accepted Christianity and taunted Hindu reaction in his organ, the *Enquirer,* a weekly which he edited from May 1831 to June 1835. He became a Christian missionary in 1837 but kept up his radicalism. Krishnamohan was very learned and the compiler of an Encyclopaedia and a play, entitled *The Persecuted.* In this he exposed the hypocrisy of the orthodox Hindus besides advocating against the caste

system. His attacks were mainly directed against Raja Radhakanta Dev and his associates. He edited *Encyclopaedia Bengalensis* (13 volumes) under Government of Bengal patronage. This is also known as *Vidyakalpadruma.* This Encyclopaedia not only contributed to the enrichment of the vernacular, but also enabled Bengalis to study Western literature and sciences in their own language. He was chosen to become the first President of the Indian Association, formed on the initiative of Surendra Nath Banerjee.

Dakshinaranjan Mukherji (1814-1878)

At the other pole in the group stood Dakshinaranjan Mukherji, the bright rich young man of the group, donor of the site for the Bethune College for Women in Calcutta when it was a novel venture for higher education for girls. In 1831, he established the Young Bengal journal, *Jnananvesan* and throughout his life, held very radical political and social views. During the Sepoy Mutiny, he wrote articles in the *Times* (London) against the mutiny and supporting the British. Dakshinaranjan was intimate with the Derozio family, forward in defying every convention and prominent in all Young Bengal activities.

He was forced out of Calcutta society by a social scandal and settled down in Oudh. He secretly married Basanta Kumari, young widow of Maharaja Tejesh Chandra Bahadur of Burdwan, in Calcutta according to English civil marriage laws. Long afterwards he proudly told Rajnarain Bose, when he visited him in Lucknow in 1867-68, that his marriage was at once "a widow-remarriage, inter-caste marriage and civil marriage. Where could one get a better social reformer?"

Rasikkrishna Mallik (1810-1858)

Known as the "crest-gem" of the Young Bengal group, Rasik Krishna studied at the Hindu College until 1830 and passed with certificates of merit and proficiency. He began his career as a teacher in Hare's School, but was removed as a consequence of

the beef-eating incident at Krishnamohan's house. Ramtonoo Lahiri described him as their "guide, philosopher and friend". He took charge of Dakshinaranjan's journal, *Jnananvesan.* Rasik Krishna was noted for great erudition and thoughtful speech. He had once refused to swear in a law court by the holy Ganges water. He had to leave his home to escape from orthodoxy. Later on, as an honest official he built up a great reputation for personal integrity.

Ramgopal Ghose (1815-1868)

Ramgopal Ghose became the most famous of the Derozians. He made a great name as a successful businessman but kept himself in the closest touch with his college friends and thus formed the centre of the whole group. He was connected with all the cultural and political activities of Young Bengal and became famous all over the country with his eloquent orations and his protest against European pretensions in the Black Acts controversy.

Peary Chand Mitra (1814-1883)

Peary Chand Mitra managed in his student days a free school for other students. He was connected with the Calcutta Public Library from its inception in 1835, as a deputy librarian, librarian, secretary and curator successively and he made the Library an intellectual centre. This library later became the Imperial Library. He was a regular contributor to the Young Bengal journals, *Jnananvesan* and *Bengal Spectator,* and a man of varied interests. He frequently contributed articles to *Calcutta Review, India Review, Englishman, Indian Mirror, Bengal Hurkaru* and *Hindoo Patriot* on various topics. His varied gifts were reflected in his editing of the *Agricultural Miscellany* in 1853. His Bengali novel, *Alaler Gharer Dulal,* was highly commended by Bankimchandra Chatterjee who described him as "the first writer who...drew his material from...real life."

Radhanath Sikdar (1813-1870)

A close friend of Peary Chand Mitra was Radhanath Sikdar, diarist and mathematician, computer and surveyor in the Government department, whose courageous stand for the rights of the poor coolies under the department freed them from the servitude of unpaid forced labour at the whim of the sahib. Radhanath bluntly refused marriage with the child wife proposed for him in the usual manner. The two friends Peary Chand and Radhanath, conducted, towards the end of this period a campaign for a simple colloquial style in Bengali prose. It was Radhanath Sikdar who discovered that the peak No. 15 in the Himalayas measured 29,002 ft., which was named however after his former boss, Sir George Everest.He liked beef and maintained that beef-eaters were never bullied!

Ramtonoo Lahiri (1813-1898)

The saintly Ramtonoo Lahiri was loved and respected by all, even by the common people, though he publicly renounced his sacred Brahmanic thread in 1851, kept pace with progressive thought throughout his long life, and as a mere school master struggled against poverty most of his days. The great scholar, Sivanath Sastri, wrote a book on Bengali society in the nineteenth century around him entitled *Ramtonoo Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga-samaj* [Ramtonoo Lahiri and Contemporary Bengali Society].

Sibchandra Deb (1811-1890)

Sibchandra Deb is remembered as a great benefactor of his native town, Konnagar, as an upright official, and as a prominent Brahmo leader.

Harachandra Ghosh (1808-1868)

Another Derozian official with a reputation for integrity.

V

ISWARCHANDRA VIDYASAGAR (1820-1891)

The emergence of Vidyasagar is a significant milestone in the cultural resurgence of nineteenth century Bengal. Born in a poor Brahmin family of Birsingha Village in Midnapur district, Vidyasagar was brought to Calcutta at the age of nine to study at the Sanskrit College.

The hereditary caste occupation of Vidyasagar's family had been teaching in *tols* and *chatuspatihs*. On the advice of a relative, Madhusudhan Vachaspati, then a student of Sanskrit College, Vidyasagar was admitted to the same college to get sound Sanskrit education.

It was in 1829 when Vidyasagar came to Calcutta that the rite of *Sati* was abolished by decree and Derozio and his students were carrying on the agitation against obsolete social ideas. Orthodox Hindu sentiment was outraged by the legislation abolishing *Sati,* and the entire Hindu community seemed to be in revolt. The *Dharma Sabha* was organized on January 17, 1830 by orthodox Hindus to resist such western influence.

Vidyasagar's teacher in Sanskrit literature was a profound scholar, Joygopal Tarkalankar. Vidyasagar stood first in the final examination of *Sahitya* (Literature) in 1834-35. After getting creditably through *Alankar* (Aesthetics), *Vedanta* and *Smriti* (Jurisprudence), he appeared for the Hindu Law Committee's examination in 1839, and qualified for the office of Hindu Law Officer in "any of the Established Courts of Judicature." In the middle of 1839 he also qualified himself for the title, Vidyasagar,

by which title he later came to be known and remembered. He then studied *Nyaya* philosophy. After about 12 years of study at the Sanskrit College he was awarded the Final Certificate of Proficiency in Sanskrit Language and Literature on December 4, 1841.

He was appointed Head Pandit in the Fort William College in the same month, December, 1841. In April 1846 he was appointed Assistant Secretary to the Sanskrit College but he resigned in 1847 following a clash with the Secretary of the College, Rasamoy Dutta, about his plan to reform the educational system. The object of reform, as stated by Vidyasagar in his reply to Dutta asking why he resigned, was "to produce men who will be highly useful in the work of imbuing our Vernacular dialects with the science and civilization of the Western World." The reply to Dutta's letter in May 1847 was later considerably enlarged and detailed as the "General Report on Public Instruction", 1850-51.

In March 1849 he was reappointed in the Fort William College as Head Writer and Treasurer, and became the Principal of the Sanskrit College in 1851. While in Fort William College he learned Hindi and English. He studied Shakespeare with Ananda Krishna Basu, a grandson of Raja Radhakanta Dev, when he also came to know Radhakanta Dev. The Raja is said to have been "very much impressed with the brilliance of young Vidyasagar", but Vidyasagar later had to consider the Raja as his chief opponent in the social reform movement.

Vidyasagar did not remain a mere scholar. As an educational reformer he opened the Sanskrit College to non-Brahmin boys. Eminent Sanskrit scholars, including his former teacher and present colleagues, alarmed that this might spell doom for Hinduism, tried to organise resistance. He argued that if the non-Brahmins were to be debarred from learning the sacred language why did not they prevent Radhakanta Dev from studying and nurturing it and why did they teach the subject to Europeans for monetary gains. This silenced the opposition.

In a note commenting on the report of Dr. Ballantyne, Principal of the Benaras Sanskrit College, Vidyasagar later wrote that "the sole object of his life was to train a batch of people, who would be well-versed in traditional scriptures but, at the same time, be free from the prevailing prejudices of their countrymen." In the same note he stated "...we are obliged to continue the teaching of Vedanta and Sankhya in the Sanskrit College. That the Vedanta and Sankhya are false systems of philosophy is no more a matter of dispute...(so) while teaching these in the Sanskrit course we should oppose them by sound philosophy in the English course to counteract their influence" On the same argument he excluded Bishop Berkeley's works from the curriculum which, in his opinion, were as far from truth as those of Vedanta and Sankhya. And he considered the inclusion of John Stuart Mill's work in the curriculum as "indispensable." In conclusion, he wrote : "The bigotry of the learned in India, I am ashamed to state, is not in the least inferior to that of the Arab."

As Dr. Arabinda Poddar has commented : "A keen insight into the historical process took him to a different harbour. The dynamism of western ideas had set his being into a state of convulsion. The spirit of revolt was stirring within him; he resolved to make the east-bound Bengali society turn west." There is a "note" preserved among the manuscript records of the Sanskrit College, drafted by Vidyasagar and dated April 12, 1852, with the caption "Notes on the Sanskrit College." The first paragraph in which he summed up his views are :

1. The creation of an enlightened Bengali literature.
2. Such a literature cannot be formed by those who are not competent to collect the materials from European sources.
3. Hence the necessity of making Sanskrit scholars well versed in the English language and literature.
4. Mere English scholars are altogether incapable of expressing their ideas in elegant and idiomatic Bengali, and hence–

5. Students of the Sanskrit College should be made familiar with English literature.

He realized that only western ideas could dispel India's spiritual obscurantist ideas and as such these ideas had to be communicated through the medium of Bengali to spread its message to the remote villages. Thus when Lord Hardinge decided to establish experimental Bengali schools in 1844, Vidyasagar cooperated with him energetically. Although only 33 of them survived, these were run entirely on the scheme drawn up by Vidyasagar. He also became a leading exponent of female education. And when John Drinkwater Bethune established the public school for girls, Vidyasagar took over charge as the Secretary in December, 1850. The land for the school was donated by a Derozian, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee. Between November, 1857 and May 1858 Vidyasagar established as many as 35 schools for girls with a total enrolment of about 1300 students and all of them in the villages.

Vidyasagar's attitude to social reform which took concrete shape in the agitation for widow remarriage has a long history. It drew its first open support from the *Atmitya Sabha* founded by Rammohun Roy in 1815. In 1819 the Sabha condemned "the necessity of an infant widow passing her life in a state of celibacy, the practice of polygamy and of suffering widows to burn with the corpse of their husbands." The problem was later taken up earnestly by the Derozians through the columns of their English journal, *Inquirer* and the Bengali, *Jnananvesan.* The Derozians also advocated widow remarriage through their organ, *The Bengal Spectator,* in 1842. A new social situation was also created by the efforts of *Tattwabodhini Sabha* founded by Debendranath Tagore in 1839. Vidyasagar was closely associated with the *Sabha* which started the journal *Tattwabodhini Patrika* in 1843. Vidyasagar was a member of its editorial board and a regular contributor. The editor, Akshaykumar Dutta was one of Vidyasagar's great friends and his collaborator in the cause of social reform. Vidyasagar first put forward his proposal

in an article in the *Tattwabodhini Patrika.*

It was Vidyasagar's agitation which made *Widow Remarriage* a live issue and secured legislative approval in 1856. He campaigned and had a petition signed by about a thousand people submitted to the government in October 1855 and by the Act XV of 1856 widow remarriage was legalised. A counter-petition, signed by 36,763 people under the leadership of Raja Radhakanta Dev, was submitted in opposition to Vidyasagar's move.

Vidyasagar revived the tradition of social reform initiated by Rammohun Roy. He raised his powerful voice against child marriage as early as 1850 and campaigned against polygamy (as evident in the practice of Kulinism) during the period, 1871-73. Austere beyond the dreams of "Young Bengal", it was left to this Brahmin, often described as a "European in Indian dress", to carry forward the best traditions of Rammohun's social crusade.

In the words of Ramesh Chandra Dutta, ICS, scholar-administrator of the nineteenth century : "On one side self-interest, inertia, stupidity - on the other, against them, Vidyasagar; on one side, social oppression of widows, heartlessness of men, torpor of a society in decadence - on the other, against them, Vidyasagar; on one side , age-old superstitions and the dead weight of evil customs - on the other, Vidyasagar; on one side lifeless, static and spiritless Bengali society - one the other side Vidyasagar." (As translated by Arabindo Poddar in *Renaissance in Bengal : Quests and Confrontations, 1800-1860*; Indian Institute of Advanced Study; Simla, 1970; p. 191.

In Bengali prose, Vidyasagar's work was a landmark. Between 1847 and 1863, he wrote a series of books in Bengali which became classics for the students of literature. *His Bengali Primer* is even today in household use.

Vidyasagar was rarely involved in political discussion. He never discussed the present or future consequences of British rule in India. But the fact that he unhesitatingly allowed British

soldiers to be garrisoned at the Sanskrit College during the Sepoy mutiny do reveal that he regarded well of the British rule of India. Dr. Poddar writes : "Like his Anglophile contemporaries, like Rammohun himself, Vidyasagar also had a buoyant faith in the English social institutions and sense of justice, and above all, in the liberal humanism of the post-(French) Revolutionary Europe. But what was striking in this case was the way in which theory merged into practice." (ibid., p. 189).

Vidyasagar died on July 29, 1891.

* * *

VI

KALI PRASANNA SINGHA (1840-70)

Among the wealthy and the aristocratic of Calcutta there were few, barring Rammohun and Radhakanta Dev, who could equal the accomplishments of Kali Prasanna Singha. The only son of a wealthy father, he was the great grandson of Dewan Santiram Singha. He gave up formal studies at a very young age and studied at home English under William Kirkpatrick, and Sanskrit and Bengali under well-known pundits of the time.

At the age of 13, Kali Prasanna founded the *Vidyotsahini Sabha* (Association for the cultivation of Knowledge) which met weekly and where papers used to be read regularly and discussions held on various social, cultural and intellectual topics. It was through this Association that Kali Prasanna collected over 3000 signatures for the petition to introduce widow remarriage,

the campaign for which was already launched by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. When the Widow Remarriage Bill was passed, he announced a reward of Rs. 1000/- to every person who would marry a widow.

This Association also called a special meeting to honour Michael Madhusudhan Dutta for introducing blank verse in the Bengali language. The meeting was held on 12th February, 1861. When Rev. James Long was sentenced to one month's imprisonment and fine of Rs. 1000/- for translating Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil-Darpan,* Kali Prasanna immediately paid the fine in the court. On the Ist of March, 1862, the *Vidyotsahini Sabha* presented an excellent valedictory address to Rev. James Long on the day of his departure for home.

Kali Prasanna also established a Theatre in the name of Vidyotsahini Theatre to develop the drama movement. The first drama staged by the Sabha was "Beni-Samhar" which was written by Bhattanarayan and translated into Bengali by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna. Kali Prasanna himself acted in the play. In 1857, Kali Prasanna translated the Sanskrit play, *Bikram-Urvasi,* written by Kalidasa, and in 1858 he wrote another play, *Savitri-Satyaban* and staged them, playing the main role in both.

Besides publishing and editing the monthly journal, *Vidyotsahini Patrika* which was started on 20th April, 1855 and lasted for one year, he also published the journal, *Sarva-tattva Prakasika,* another intellectual forum, from July 1856 and thereafter, *Bibidhartha Sangraha,* the first six numbers of which was edited by Raja Rajendralal Mitra. For a while he also published a daily paper in the name of *Paridarshak* (Observer).

Among his books are : *Baboo Natak* (1854), *Vikramorvasi Natak* (1857). *Savitri Satyaban Natak* (1858), *Malati Madhab Natak* (1859) all of which are plays. His other books are : *Hutom Panchar Naksa* (1862), a satire on Calcutta society; *Purana-sangraha,* a collection of Pauranic stories from *Mahabharata* published over the period 1860-1866; *Srimatbha gavatgita* which was posthumously published in 1902. But his

greatest work was the translation of the *Mahabharata* into Bengali in 15 volumes; this was not available in Bengali translation before he did it.

After his death, *The Indian Mirror* wrote : "Among the wealthy and aristocratic classes of Calcutta there were few, young or old, that could equal the accomplishments of Kali Prosonno Singh...He started a vernacular daily newspaper, under the model of English journalism, called it *Paridarshaka,* for sometime conducted the well-known Bengali monthly journal *Vividartha Sungraha* and when the *Hindoo Patriot* was on the verge of ruin, he rescued it at great expense...Nor was he wanting in public spirit. The ardent co-operation which he rendered to Dr. Duff during the Famine of 1861 in the N.W. Provinces, the ready help which Mr. Long received from him during the *Nil Durpan* troubles, and the munificent gifts of stone fountains which he made to the Municipality amply testify to this."

And he did all this in the thirty years that he lived. He died on 24th July 1870.

* * *

VII

REV. LALBEHARI DAY (1824-1894)

Lalbehari was born in a poor 'suvarna-vanik' family in the village Sonapalasi in Burdwan district on 18th December, 1824. His great` -grandfather migrated to Dacca during the Mahratta troubles about 1745. His father Radhakanta left Dacca after his

first wife died there and settled in Sonapalasi in 1805. Here he married again. Radhakanta was a "bill and stock broker in Calcutta. He could not read and write English", wrote Lalbehari in the *Bengal Magazine* in February 1873 (*Recollections of My School Days*-by an old Bengali boy). Radhakanta was acquainted with a few English words necessary for his job.

Lalbehari recalls with great respect the memory of his father who was a devout Vaishnava. Lalbehari's family belonged to the 'suvarna-vanik'caste and later became converts to Vaishnavism because of oppressions on his caste by Ballal Sena, according to another essay he wrote in the *Bengal Magazine in* 1872 under the title, "The Banker Caste of Bengal".

Lalbehari began his study like other boys of his time at the village school (pathshala). At the age of nine, his father brought him down to Calcutta to study English. It took them four days to reach Tribeni in the Hooghly district by foot, from where they came to Jagannath Ghat in north Calcutta by boat, Lalbehari recalls. At that time in 1833-34, there were four schools in Calcutta where English was taught, the Hindu College, Duff's School called General Assembly Institution, Hare's School run by Calcutta School Society and Gourmohan Addya's School or the Oriental Seminary. The fees in these schools ranged from three to five rupees per month and Lalbehari's father was not in a position to pay such high fees for his son's English study.

But there was a great urge to learn English. Sivanath Sastri wrote that the desire to give English education was so great at that time that it was difficult for David Hare to come out of his house. As soon he would come out, groups of boys would flock by the side of his palanquin and shout : "me poor boy have pity on me, me take in your school". In fact Ramtonoo Lahiri, who later became an eminent educationist, got admitted to Hare's school in this manner.

In his preface to the English-Bengali Dictionary, the first one published in Calcutta in 1834, Ramcomul Sen, grandfather of Keshub Chandra Sen, wrote : "In 1774 the

Supreme Court was established here (in Calcutta), and from this period a knowledge of the English language appeared to be desirable and necessary."

Because his father was unable to pay his fees, Lalbehari with a recommendation from Radhaprasad, eldest son of Raja Rammohun Roy, took admission in Duff's free school.

The General Assembly Institute was started by Duff on 13th July 1830 with the help of Rammohun Roy. Duff had come from Scotland to attract Hindu students and convert them into Christianity. In 1832 he had converted Krishna Mohan Banerjee. So Lalbehari's relatives urged his father not to admit Lalbehari to Duff's school. Lalbehari's father wanted his son to study a little English so that he could be more successful in life than him. His idea was to take Lalbehari away from school as soon as he learnt a little English but Lalbehari developed a keen interest in his studies and began to do well in all his examinations securing gold medals.

Lalbehari's father died in 1838, when young Lalbehari moved into the house of a distant cousin and continued his studies. He came to know about some scholarships in Hare School for meritorious students and approached Hare. But David Hare refused to admit him because Day was a student of Duff's school. Hare told him : "You read the New Testament; you are half a Christian. You will spoil my boys". Hare was an agnostic and was opposed to the activities of missionaries in converting boys to Christianity. He even used to punish his boys if they went to listen to religious lectures of those missionaries.

Duff went to Scotland in 1834 and returned in 1840 and renewed his conversion work in full vigour. Lalbehari became a Christian on 2nd July 1843, partly because of his own pecuniary circumstances and partly because he felt that Christianity was better than Brahmoism which he tried to emulate earlier.

From 1846 Lalbehari was thinking of establishing a national Church in Bengal as a true believer. In June of that year

he even wrote to Jnanendra Mohan Tagore "I would construct the United National Church of Bengal on the broadest possible basis, so as to include in its communion a great variety of opinions." Jnanendra Mohan had not yet become a Christian although he was close to it. Jnanendra Mohan was later converted into Christianity on 10th June 1851 by Rev. Krishnamohan Banerjee.

Meanwhile a conflict had arisen over state control on the National Church of Scotland. Duff opposed it; as a result the Church was split. One group remained in the established Church, while Duff led the other to form the "Free Protesting Church of Scotland". As an independent free-thinker, Lalbehari sided with Duff and joined the Protesting Church. In 1846 he began to work as a Catechist in Duff's Church and in 1851 he went to Ambika-Kalna in Burdwan district to work as a priest. In 1855 Lalbehari was 'ordained to the office of the holy ministry by the Free Church Presbytery of Calcutta' at Cornwallis Square in Calcutta. And shortly afterwards he came to clash with Duff. Earlier, in 1849 Lalbehari had proposed to Duff to take him to Scotland to study Christian Theology and Philosophy which Duff had turned down and which hurt Lalbehari.

Lalbehari vigorously opposed the colour discrimination practised by European Christian priests who opposed Indians going up to the top positions in the Church. When he found that Indians were disallowed in the Mission Council, he openly asked Duff to discontinue this practice. Duff would not agree to the demand which forced Lalbehari to appeal to the highest committee in Scotland, "the Foreign Mission Committee" in protest which angered Duff.

Lalbehari adopted Christianity but was not prepared to accept humiliation of Indians. His nationalist pride would not allow it. In later years, both he and Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjee condemned this discriminatory attitude of European missionaries.

His nationalist pride was so strong that when Rowe and Webb, in their text book, *Hints on the Study of English,* made

taunting remarks about the "Babu English" of Indians, Lalbehari pointed out in the *Bengal Magazine,* Sep. 1874, the mistakes in every page of the preface of that book and commented : "What shall we say then of the two gentlemen who laugh at 'Baboo English' and at the same time commit egregious grammatical blunders and murder the Queen's English?...Shall we regard it as one of the newly discovered *idiotism* of the English language into the mysteries of which, we are told, it is impossible for the natives of Bengal to be initiated?"

Lalbehari's biographer, Macpherson wrote : "He (Lalbehari) thought for himself and adhered to his convictions...He refused to believe that he belonged to a race inferior to European."

During his stay at Ambika-Kalna in Burdwan, Lalbehari began to collect materials for his two famous books, *Folk Tales of Bengal* and *Bengal Peasant Life.* The first one was published serially in the *Bengal Magazine* from August 1875 and the second one was published as a book in 1874.

While in that village, Ambika-Kalna, Lalbehari read a book by Collin Mackenzie titled *The Mission Camp* and came to know about the intelligent daughter of Rev. Harmadji Pestonji of Gujrat. He began to correspond with her and it is this lady, Bachubhai, whom he married on 2nd January, 1860 at Gogo in Gujrat. He had to wait to collect his fare from Calcutta to Gujrat.

From Ambika-Kalna, he also edited a Bengali language fortnightly journal, *Arunodaya,* and wrote articles on the need for education in Bengali language and making it the medium of instruction. He, however, commented in those articles that the real development of the Bengali language did not occur during the Mohammedan rule but during the British.

In social and economic matters too he was very radical-minded. He strongly criticised the oppression of the peasants by the Zemindars (landlords) and wrote : "Systematic oppression from time immemorial has paralysed their energies, deprived

them of their native manliness and reduced them to the ignoble condition of slaves...The zemindar's *Katchery* (Collection Office) is the scene of the ryot's degradation".

His two famous novels are : (1) *Gobinda Samanta,* a revised form of *Bengal Peasant Life* and (2) *Chandramukhee, A Tale of Bengali Life* (1859) which was earlier serialised in *Arunodaya.*

Charles Darwin, the celebrated biologist, was so pleased to read *Gobinda Samanta* that he wrote to the publisher on 18th April 1881 : "I see that Rev. Lal Behari Day is Editor of the *Bengal Magazine* and I shall be glad if you would tell him with my compliments how much pleasure and instruction I derived from reading a few years ago, his novel, *Gobinda Samanta."*

All of Lalbehari Day's writings reflect a deep attachment to rural Bengal and a genuine concern for the upliftment of rural Bengali life.

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Throughout her history Bengal had faced a series of invasions, physical and cultural. Exploitation by constantly changing monarchies had disturbed Bengal's social and economic life through the centuries. But Bengalis have always tried to adapt to new ideas. Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, primarily because of the advent of the new conquerors from the West and consequent impact of new ideas and opening up of economic opportunities, a new class of people came into social prominence and assumed community leadership. A tremendous upsurge of social, economic and intellectual activity, hitherto unforeseen in India, developed in Bengal.

Heralding the "Renaissance", and to effectively respond to the new ideas and their protagonists, the Bengali orthodoxy also made contributions in a large measure. The conflict between the protagonists of new liberal thoughts and values and the orthodoxy characterises the nineteenth century intellectual life of Bengal.

This work presents a panoramic view of centuries of ideas, and of the lives and works of some *builders* of modern Bengal.

Samaren Roy (born October, 1919), a Science graduate of Calcutta University, joined politics in 1939 as an associate of M.N. Roy (1887-1954), who since then had stayed with the author's family in Calcutta each winter. Between 1944 and 1952 Roy edited and published a number of journals in English and Bengali. He has been regularly contributing articles to various newspapers and journals in India and abroad. From 1952 to 1955 he studied *Navya Nyaya* in a *tol* and wrote monographs on the rationalist schools of ancient Indian thought and the Vedas. From 1956 to 1983 he was political analyst at the American Consulate-General in Calcutta.

Roy has written a number of books in English and Bengali.

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